

**86—EIGHTY-SIX,
Vol. 8: Gun Smoke
on the Water**

**Asato Asato
Shirabii**

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86

[EIGHTY-
SIX]

**ASATO
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ILLUSTRATION:
Shirabii

MECHANICAL DESIGN:
I-IV

8

GUN SMOKE ON THE WATER



86

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NEW YORK



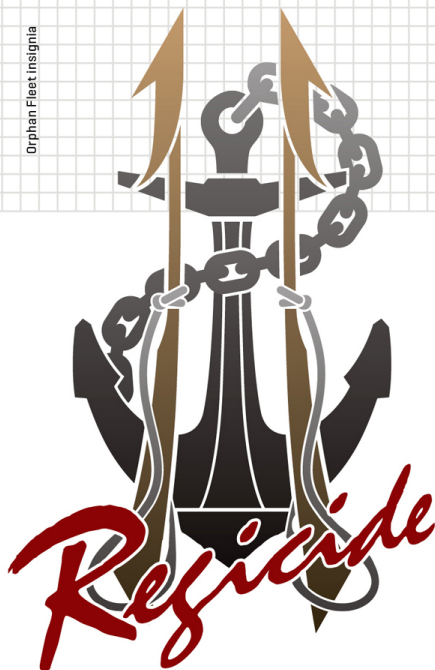
[TITLE]

KEYWORD INTRODUCTIONS

The song from the sea
drives their souls mad.

[design]
BELL'S GRAPHICS

Orphan Fleet insignia



Orphan Fleet

The Fleet Countries' integrated fleet.

While they've craftily continued to survive during the war with the Legion, it has exhausted much of their military might, leaving only a few serviceable vessels. Its flagship is the supercarrier Stella Maris. Its captain and fleet commander is Ishmael Ahab.

The coming battle is a joint operation between them and the Strike Package.

The Regicide Fleet Countries

A union of small nations located along the frozen shores to the east of the United Kingdom of Roa Gracia and to the north of the Federal Republic of Gjad. They were formed from a federation of eleven Fleet Countries, hence them being called "countries" as opposed to a singular nation.

Before the war, they endeavored to overcome the threat of the leviathans (listed below), boasting a powerful navy. After being attacked by the Legion, the Fleet Countries reacted by sacrificing one of their countries and adopting tactics that employed naval power as their primary force.

Leviathans

The sovereigns of this world's oceans. Not marine mammals, but mysterious life-forms capable of matching—or even overwhelming—combat aircrafts and warships. The smallest of their species are only several meters in size, while bigger specimens can reach as large as fifty meters. They stand in the way of human expansion into the deep sea, and the Regicide Fleet Countries have made it national policy to hunt them.

KEYWORD
INTRODUCTIONS

What will these boys become if they cannot be soldiers?

[EIGHTY]
[SIX]



ASATO ASATO PRESENTS

ILLUSTRATION/ SHINAGI

MECHANICAL DESIGN/ FIV

Life, love, and irony. All reduced to a number.

86

— Gun Smoke on the Water —

Volume
EIGHT

Orphan Fleet flagship

Stella Maris

STELLA MARIS

SPECS

Total Length: 300 m
Fully Loaded:
Displacement:
roughly 3,00,000 tonnes
Engine: nuclear reactor

ARMAMENTS

Quinix 40 mm gun turret
mount. (x2)
*Not an anti-warship
cannon, but a massive
launcher for depth
charges meant to
defeat Leviathans

General schematic ▶

Star schematic ▶

Top schematic ▶

A large battleship known as a supercarrier. An aircraft carrier by definition. Originally a vessel designed for hunting Leviathans. Capable of launching fighter planes for competing against a type of large Leviathan called the Mankura, and attack patrol helicopters.

for dealing with medium-size Leviathans. The Legion's use of the Fortgallage prevents humans and from gaining air superiority, however, and many of the Stella Maris's aircraft have been lost. (A few surviving helicopters are still in use for low-altitude flights.)

EIGHTY-
SIX

LITHAUCY

Images 1-4

Life, love, and legacy.
All reduced to a number.

86

[EIGHTY-
SIX]

The song from the sea drives their souls mad.

8 RUN SMOKE ON THE WATER

ASATO ASATO

ILLUSTRATION: Shirabii

MECHANICAL DESIGN: I-IV

The places the Eighty-Six
venture... The places to
which I lead them...
At some point, and until
this very day, I might have
forgotten about them.

—VLADILENA MILIZÉ,
MEMOIRS

86—EIGHTY-SIX

Vol. 8

ASATO ASATO

Translation by Roman Lempert

Cover art by Shirabii

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

86—Eighty-Six—Ep. 8

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PROLOGUE

THE RED DRAGON

“About the information you reported to have received from Ms. Zelene.”

Seeing Ernst like this, Theo thought the Federacy’s temporary president somehow reminded him of a fire-breathing dragon that had grown resigned and tired of the world.

They were in the Federacy’s capital of Sankt Jeder, in the living room of Ernst’s estate. The man was, as always, clad in a standard-issue business suit. He sat on a sofa, facing a table surrounded by Theo, Shin, Raiden, Anju, Kurena, and Frederica.

The black eyes behind his glasses were those of a father enjoying his day off. They were not, by any means, the gaze of the president of one of the largest countries on the continent, who had just obtained the means to disable the mechanical threat sweeping over the land with one fell swoop.

Yes.

The Legion could be stopped.

The method involved a hidden headquarters capable of broadcasting a shutdown signal, and a member of the Adel-Adler royal bloodline, who possessed supreme command authority over the old Giadian Empire’s army, including the Legion.

With the fall of the Empire of Giad, the latter of these two keys was publicly considered lost, but as long as one could gather them both...

Zelene entrusted Shin with this information, and he chose to

prioritize sharing it with Frederica, the other four who knew her true identity, and Ernst. He told no one else.

Not even Lena.

The more people who knew about a sensitive piece of information, the more likely it was to leak. As the final empress, Frederica already carried the risk of becoming a banner under which loyalists to the Empire might try to overturn the Federacy. And now she had also been given the added value of being the sole key capable of sweeping away the shadow of war that was the Legion.

Still, Shin had to report this to Ernst. This was information that would go on to influence the future of humankind, and Shin choosing to hide it at his own discretion would surely be seen as treason.

So, he'd found some excuse to return to Sankt Jeder and, after some consideration, entrusted Ernst with this information. A few days had passed since, during which Ernst carefully scrutinized these findings with military and government officials who were aware of Frederica's situation.

"I'll start with the bottom line...", Ernst said. "You are to go to your next dispatch site, as previously planned."

"What...?" Frederica's large eyes widened further with shock. "You petty paper pusher! Why?! You have me, your empress, by your side. You need only retake the hidden headquarters! Why do you not give the order?!"

"This thing 'I need only do' is more complicated than that. We know absolutely nothing about this hidden headquarters."

Frederica looked at Ernst as if dumbstruck. He, however, simply smiled.

"The Federacy inherited many things from the Empire, territory included. But when all is said and done, we were enemies of the Empire who devoured it from the inside out. And the people of the Empire wouldn't tell their enemies of a hidden headquarters, now would they? Nor would they reveal its existence to allies of theirs who have no business in that headquarters."

And since it was an Imperial military base, it was likely nestled deep within the old Empire's territory, probably in land occupied by the Legion. The Federacy no longer had the military power to investigate all the possible sites within the Legion's territories by brute force.

"And to add to that...there's the place you will be dispatched to. The situation there is, believe it or not, more urgent. We've discovered what we believe to be the hints of a second large-scale offensive in the base you're scheduled to attack."

Silence settled over the room. Someone swallowed nervously. The large-scale offensive. The attack that drove the Federacy's western

front to the brink of collapse and toppled the Republic in the space of a week. A tidal wave of mechanical soldiers whose fearsome designations matched their blood-chilling appearances. The Legion.

And that tidal wave was rising once again.

“That base must be eliminated at all costs. And as you go about storming it, I want you to retrieve certain information from within.”

“Certain information?” Raiden furrowed his brow. “What kind of information do you expect us to get out of the Legion?”

“The Merciless Queen is Major Zelene Birkenbaum of the Imperial army. The Morpho’s control system was the leader of Empress Augusta’s royal guard. And the Admiral in the Charité Underground Labyrinth in the northern Republic was also someone affiliated with the old Empire.”

Heil dem Reich.

The final words of the faceless ghost who had possessed the Admiral called out continually. Shin narrowed his eyes in realization.

“So former Imperials were turned into Shepherds.”

“That doesn’t really surprise me. The Legion were originally weapons of the Empire, after all. The inner circle of the Imperial faction would certainly know about any hidden headquarters the Federacy has no information on. And so, since they’re Shepherds, we can gather that information from their central processors...or at least, I hope we can. We’ll only know once we try.”

The Legion’s central processors were protected by firm encryption that still hadn’t been cracked. Theo had to wonder if all this wasn’t too shrouded in uncertainty when Kurena parted her lips to speak.

“Can you really do that? There were only about a hundred Shepherds in the Eighty-Sixth Sector alone.”

Millions had died on that battlefield over the last nine years, and no one was allowed to properly dispose of their remains. That was why the Eighty-Sixth Sector produced countless Legion that had taken in human brain structures—the Black Sheep and Shepherds. But even so, there were only a hundred or so Shepherds that properly maintained the intelligence they had in life.

Machine-gun fire could easily shatter the human cranium. Tank shells could blow the human body to bits. Intact brains would be a rare find on a battlefield where such ammunition whizzed through the air freely.

“Yes. This is only one of several threads we’re investigating in tandem. We’re trying to find other means of doing this... Both myself and the generals don’t think every single commander unit out there is necessarily a former Imperial.”

But one or two *might have* been a Shepherd. And given the importance of this base, one of them *might have* been stationed there.

That was what the Federacy's top brass were thinking.

"We can tell if that's true because we have Shin on our side, but it all feels so vague...", said Anju, looking up at the ceiling in a confused manner.

Everyone else reacted similarly. Frederica alone moved her gaze from Ernst to Shin in a fidgety manner, while Shin closed his eyes like an indifferent guard dog.

"...However, there is one dead member of the former Imperial faction who definitely became a Shepherd and is sure to know about the hidden headquarters."

He wasn't a high-ranking officer, but he did serve as the empress's loyal knight. Even after death, he remained trapped within the Morpho's central processor...

"*Kiriya Nouzen*. What if I were to tell you that his ghost is inside that base?"

"...!" Frederica went pale.

Even Shin hardened his expression at those words. It was him, after all, who had destroyed the Morpho.

"...I defeated him a year ago. I'm sure of that. And there can't exist multiple units of the same Shepherd. We can't rely on a ghost that doesn't exist for information."

"Don't they at least have spare units? And even if it's not him, that base is a key position for the Legion's large-scale offensive. There must be a considerable number of commander units set up there."

Shin fell silent, clearly displeased. He didn't like what Ernst was suggesting. Having heard the final cries of his Shepherd brother for as long as he did, Shin saw the mechanical ghosts as human in their own right. The idea of them being read for information like machine parts didn't sit well with him.

"Well, either way...as you can see, even if we have a method of shutting down the Legion, it will take time and effort to achieve it. So we're not going to ignore Frederica's safety and hurry to deactivate them. You don't have to worry, Shin. None of you need to worry. That said, there is a group that concerns me more than the headquarters' position or the remnants of the Imperial faction... Anyway, for now, we'll be focusing our efforts on the recovery operation and manipulating intelligence to keep Frederica's existence hidden. We can't begin the shutdown operation until we've done that. After all..."

The justice the Federacy pursues does not allow it to become a country that sacrifices children.

"You would speak of justice, even as you watch countless many of your people die!" Frederica said, getting to her feet. "How can my life alone compare to countless millions of the Federacy's people? To the untold billions across humankind?! Why can you not see...?"

“If we are to enable that kind of atrocity, humankind may as well be destroyed,” Ernst said menacingly.

Frederica froze up in fear. Theo shuddered as well. Ernst had once said something like this before. That was his reasoning for why the five of them hadn’t been disposed of by the Federacy.

If we have to kill children because they’re unfamiliar to us...

If that’s what humankind has to do to survive, then we deserve to be wiped out.

“Besides, I never liked the idea of sending you Eighty-Six alone to turn the tide of the war. If you want to fight, *too*, so be it. But sacrificing *you alone* to win the war? No. That’s wrong. And if a day comes where I stop feeling that way...”

“I don’t like this, Ernst.” Shin cut into his words.

He had the serenity, sharpness, and strength of an old, unbroken blade, shining on a moonlit battlefield.

“I don’t think humankind ought to be wiped out for that. My wish won’t come true if they do. Stop saying humankind ought to be destroyed whenever things don’t go your way. It’s unpleasant.”

For a moment, it felt as if Ernst’s pitch-black eyes clashed with Shin’s bloodred gaze. The smile of the umbral void seemed to meet the crimson, flame-colored eyes and bounce off them.

“...Briefing acknowledged. We’ll accept the order to seize the central processor. I want to end this war as much as you do. But I won’t let you wipe out humanity.”

Nor would he choose a path that required sacrificing Frederica.

Frederica fell silent, looking like she was on the verge of tears. Next to her, Raiden watched on wordlessly in agreement, and Anju nodded with a kind smile. Kurena’s expression was a bit anxious, though.

Since the living room didn’t have a mirror, Theo couldn’t tell what expression he was wearing right now. But somehow, he knew...had it been before, had it been Shin as he was in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, he probably wouldn’t have said those words. He couldn’t have said them. He didn’t care for the end of the war or have any wishes he wanted to see granted.

Those were things that didn’t exist in the Eighty-Sixth Sector.

It truly made Theo understand...that Shin really had left the Eighty-Sixth Sector.

Federal Republic of Glad Military
Eighty-Sixth Strike Package



Shin

A young man marked by the Republic of San Magnolia with the stigma of being a subhuman Eighty-Six. He possesses the ability to hear the "voices" of the Legion and is a pilot of remarkable skill who has survived countless battles. He is currently the operations commander for the newly formed Eighty-Sixth Strike Package.



Lena

A Handler who once fought alongside Shin and the Eighty-Six. She has been reunited with them following their death march into Legion territory cruelly disguised as a Special Reconnaissance mission and now serves as tactical commander for the Federacy, once again fighting side by side with them.



Frederica

An orphaned daughter of the old Empire of Glad, where the Legion were developed. She cooperates with Shin and the Eighty-Six for the sake of defeating Kiriya, her former knight and brotherly guardian, who was assimilated by the Legion. She currently serves as an assistant control aide for Lena in the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package. Revealed to be the key to stopping the Legion War.



Raiden

A young man of the Eighty-Six who found shelter in the Federacy along with Shin. At one point he turned to Shin. Raiden came from a location where the haunting voices of the Legion were always his.



Kurena

A young woman of the Eighty-Six who was an assassin. She ended up in the Federacy along with Shin, but will then over her imprisonment.?



Theo

A young man of the Eighty-Six. As a childhood friend with a strong temper, he tends to high-mindedly speak by moving about freely with the help of his wings.



Anju

A young woman of the Eighty-Six. She appears graceful but shows a much more ruthless side during battle. She specializes in suppressing fire through the use of missiles.



Grethe

Handed control. She is the commanding officer for Shin and his group, and his unit commander for the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package.



Annette

A friend of Lena's and head of research and development for the Peace-Rail system. She was childhood friends with Shin back when they both lived in the Republic's First Sector. She was displaced with Lena to the Federacy and now only barely speaks with Shin.



Shiden

One of the Eighty-Six, and a subordinate of Lena's following the departure of Shin and his group. She feels Lena's parental guilt.



Shana

A young woman of the Eighty-Six who has served as Shiden's subordinate since the Eighty-Sixth Strike. She has a calm and collected personality. She compares with Shiden's.



Rito

A young man of the Eighty-Six who joined the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package. He was once a member of a squadron that belonged to.



Michihi

A young woman of the Eighty-Six who joined the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package. Michihi, like Rito, is quiet and stoic.



Dustin

A student who gave a speech condemning the treatment of the Eighty-Six prior to the Republic's fall. He volunteered to join the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package after Republic citizens were liberated.



Marcel

A Federacy soldier who was originally a Federal Operative. But in a past battle, he suffered a debilitating injury, which left him unable to pilot a Federacy. He has since transferred to the role of support personnel in Lena's command.



Yuuto

An Eighty-Six who joined the Fed against Shin and Michihi. He is captured by Kiriya but has been transported and playing roles.



Willem

Chief of staff for the Federal Republic of Glad's Western Front military. He's an aristocrat, a skilled man, but he looks after Shin and the other young soldiers in the same way.



Vika

The fifth prince of the United Kingdom of the British. He is the Ancestry of the current generation — a young Euphrat with superhuman intelligence. These Euphrats are direct products of the New Britain from Scotland. He developed the Strike-human shape, semi-conscious control units.



Lerche

The first of the strike. She possesses the neural network of Vika's deceased childhood friend.

EIGHTY-SIX

CHAPTER 1

THE GUN IN THE HIGH CASTLE

It's said there's no training like live combat experience. And while there's some truth to that, a unit that engages exclusively in live combat will find its performance lacking in the long run. A soldier can't exhibit their full skills on the battlefield without practice. Proper education and training are imperative for success, be it in individual skill or unit tactics.

And so the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package found itself on the Rüstkammer base's training grounds. These maneuvering grounds were built in an accurate representation of the Federacy's western front; they were a mixture of woodlands and urban areas. The woodlands were a sectioned-off part of an existing forest. The urban areas were built over a deforested area and modeled after an old Imperial military stronghold town.

In one section of these maneuvering grounds was a newly built metal scaffolding of a building, which was to be the next battlefield of the Strike Package's 1st Armored Division. The metal beams were just wide enough to support a Juggernaut's size and weight. They were set up in orderly, geometric patterns.

Two polypedal armored weapons sprinted across this mesh of vertical and horizontal beams. Their Personal Marks were that of a headless skeleton shouldering a shovel and two intersected muskets—Shin's Undertaker and Olivia's Anna Maria. Olivia had been deployed to the Strike Package as a training instructor from the Alliance of Wald.

Both units competed for advantageous positions and knocked each other off their footing whenever one got the upper hand. It was a dizzyingly rapid battle, with each of them pushing every element of

their units—which had been developed for high-mobility combat—to the limits of their performance.

It was a mock one-on-one battle, with Olivia assuming the position of a hypothetical opponent. Feldreß cockpits typically stressed survivability over comfort, making them quite cramped. But with the Stollenwurm, this trait was especially stark. The personal exoskeleton took up a great deal of what little space was inside. The cockpit had no room for optical screens, and so it projected optical information directly into the pilot's retinas.

However, Olivia was pursuing Undertaker not using his physical eyesight but rather through his future sight.

Future sight. Without a royal house to unify its mountainous territory and with the nobles of the small territories that made up its turf failing to preserve the purity of their bloodline, only a single clan in the Alliance of Wald retained this extrasensory power.

In Olivia's case, he could only see three seconds into his personal, immediate future. The scope of his power depended on the phenomena in his future, but it could extend as far as several dozen meters. He could only foresee the future when he actively used his power—his clan described it as *opening one's eyes*—and his ability would not activate on its own when he was under threat.

This wasn't something Olivia could share outside his clan, but the truth of the matter was that this extrasensory power wasn't as helpful as one might expect. Using it continually greatly exhausted him, and he couldn't "keep his eyes open" all the time during operations.

Still, be it against a human or a Legion, Olivia rarely suffered a loss. Or at least, so he thought. Three seconds of foresight... Knowing what the enemy unit would do in three seconds was an incredible tactical advantage.

But Shin was able to compensate for it with the unconscious foresight afforded him by his vast combat experience and his superhuman reaction speed. It was as if he could smell blood before it was shed. He had an inexplicable sense of intuition, like a sixth sense at work.

A slash descended on Olivia. Since this was a training session, the high-frequency blade was set not to vibrate, but if this were true combat, Olivia wouldn't have been able to lock blades with it. Since it wasn't, he deflected it with a horizontal blow from his inactive high-frequency lance. He couldn't afford to "close his eyes." Without constantly looking into the future, he was no match for Shin.

Using the momentum of his deflected attack, Shin changed the trajectory of his blade to a diagonal slash. Seeing Anna Maria's intention to jump away, he forced his unit to take an extra step with his front right leg, extending the range of his attack.

Olivia canceled his backward jump, which was a bluff, and dodged sideways to avoid the attack. Using its legs as an axis, Undertaker rotated, extending the length of its horizontal slash. These were all intense movements that made even the Reginleif, which was built for high-mobility maneuvering, screech in protest. Shin's skills allowed for such transcendent movements, though.

However...

They clashed dozens of times, standing close enough to feel each other's breath. After spending so long in a state of heightened concentration that grinded one's perception of time, Undertaker was the first to stop. It was a single, brief moment, spent on filling one's lungs with fresh air.

That was the opening Olivia had been waiting for.

Anna Maria charged forward, ramming Undertaker at close range. Both units were thrown between the beams of the scaffolding, plummeting downward. Shin was at the young age of eighteen; he was still an adolescent, though he was nearing the end of his teenage years. His body was not yet fully mature. In terms of physical strength and stamina, an adult man like Olivia had the edge on him.

The two rigs fell one story, their limbs entangled. They dropped to the ground like two animals biting into each other. Since Olivia played the role of a hypothetical enemy, he wasn't connected to Shin through radio or Para-RAID. But as the impact of the blow knocked all the air out of its pilot's lungs, Undertaker seemed to stiffen in pain.

But it soon swung its long legs as if to strike its opponent, prompting Anna Maria to dodge by jumping away. A Reginleif's legs were equipped with pile drivers as a fixed armament. Olivia estimated that a direct hit from those into the cockpit would likely knock his unit out of commission.

Undertaker hopped away, using its four legs to jump back. Shin probably wanted to create distance between himself and Olivia while the damage from the crash still affected his unit, preferring to fight from afar with his 88 mm cannon. However...

"—I won't let you do that."

Shin's movements were slow. The damage was still affecting him, after all. Undertaker's jump was sluggish, lacking Shin's prior skill and intensity, and Olivia easily caught it in his sights.

Trigger.

Anna Maria's 105 mm cannon roared like a beast as it unleashed an invisible laser. Since this wasn't live training, the cannon shot a laser meant for aerial and artillery tracing, but the discharge fire and the sound of the cannon were made to simulate real cannon fire. The discharge fire covered Anna Maria's field, and the rumbling roar of the cannon drowned out the sound of the enemy unit's engine.

Olivia turned his attention to the radar screen, only to find that Undertaker's blip was still there. Apparently, the shot only hit a leg...

Olivia "opened his eyes," confirming Undertaker's position three seconds into the future and aiming Anna Maria's cannon at where it stood. The flames disappeared, and once he returned his gaze to the present, the white shadow of the enemy unit was in the center of his sights.

Undertaker's front right leg was damaged and immobile. Even with some of its mobility lost, it kept its 88 mm cannon fixed on Anna Maria...and the unit's canopy hung open. Shin wasn't inside...

...He had escaped.

Olivia looked around, finding him hidden behind a stone structure that was already crumbling from months of training sessions. He had one knee on the ground, with an assault rifle fixed on Anna Maria. Its barrel was dyed blue—an identifier for an empty gun used in training maneuvers.

Since Olivia was playing the role of a hypothetical opponent in this scenario, he was essentially playing the role of a Legion. And since the Legion didn't take prisoners, Shin had discarded his damaged unit but made the correct call of not relinquishing the will to fight.

Still, since this was training, there was no need to continue combat after this. Or rather, fighting any longer would just result in needless injury. Olivia "closed his eyes" and prepared to declare the situation resolved.

But before he could, Shin fired.

Of course, his gun was empty, and an assault rifle was ineffective against most Legion types. The sensors on Anna Maria's frontal armor detected the tracing laser impacting the unit but judged that it did no damage.

But the next second, an alarm informed him that his unit was being aimed at...by Undertaker?!

"What...?!"

Olivia's precognition was deactivated, so he could no longer see the future. This development caught him entirely by surprise. Even with its cockpit empty, Undertaker's 88 mm tank turret emitted its ballistic recognition laser. Anna Maria's flank armor sensors detected an 88 mm APFSDS (Armor-Piercing Fin-Stabilized Discarding Sabot) shell "impact" them.

For the first time in his duels with Shin, a notification informing Olivia that his unit had taken crippling damage filled the image projected into Olivia's retinas.

"That was a little... No, that was *very* unfair of you, but..."

This maneuvering ground had been set up hurriedly for the next mission, so it wasn't very large. They vacated the grounds for the next unit set to use it and moved to a tent for the debriefing. As they entered the tent, Olivia had spoken thus to Shin.

"I finally found a way to outwit your ability, Captain," Shin said.

"You'd have died if this were real combat." Olivia shook his head, gazing at Shin. "You knew I'd stop even though you were still alive because this was training..."

Shin left a serene, detached impression, which very much contrasted his boyish, unyielding spirit.

"You really are a sore loser, aren't you? Are you still holding a grudge over what happened in our first training session in the Alliance?" Olivia asked.

"You weren't serious back then, Captain. You were in a field uniform instead of your armored flight suit... I'll admit that didn't sit well with me."

"Oh... Well, at the time, Grandma showed up out of nowhere and told me to go duel with the Federacy's Feldreß."

Said grandmother was Lieutenant General Bel Aegis, the army commander for the Alliance of Wald's northern defense.

"Well, since you've gotten your payback on me, how do you feel about revealing your trick?" Olivia continued. "Of course, things are different if you're going to say you won't reveal it until you lose to me and die."

Shin shrugged with a forced smile.

"Unfortunately, that's... It's one of the main battery's firing modes. It uses a prerecorded external sound as its trigger to shoot. Seeing as how that registered sound is the sound of a pistol and machine-gun fire, I'd say it's planned around a situation where the pilot's forced to abandon their rig and rely on their basic firearm."

"The Federacy's Feldreß is equipped with those kinds of features? No..."

Olivia trailed off and then shook his head. That external-sound firing mode setting was likely added because...

"It's probably just the Reginleif. That setting's useless in normal combat."

Feldreß combat was a deafening affair. It involved the roar of cannon fire, high explosives, the power pack's howls, and the sound of the armored infantry's heavy-machine-gun fire and screams. The noise of machine-gun fire was thundering compared with a human's voice, but in that kind of battlefield, it would easily be drowned out.

Even in a training session like this one, that feature wouldn't see much use unless very particular conditions were met.

"It was added because I found myself in a similar situation once..."

but I've never actually used that feature before. Not in training nor in live combat."

"I'd imagine you didn't. And still, you brought such a hard-to-use feature to the forefront, just to get the better of me. You're one sore loser, you know that?"

"I assumed that your ability doesn't work unless you actively try to see the future, so I tried to take advantage of that."

Olivia's smile suddenly disappeared. The fact that he couldn't see the future unless he actively tried to do so was something he told no one outside his clan. This applied to Shin and the other Eighty-Six as well, even if they were his comrades in the same unit.

"...What made you think that's the case?"

"No one got the better of you during training, me included. But during our off times, you jumped when TP pounced at you, and you almost bumped into Frederica in the hallway once... That made me think that you don't always see the future, not even before you run into trouble."

Olivia raised his hands wordlessly.

"Not much to say, but...touché. Still..." He then smirked. "If only you could exhibit that boldness and observation when it comes to Colonel Milizé."

Shin stiffened with a start.

"...I'm not sure what you're referring to."

"Oh, can I be clear, then?" Olivia said, his smile widening. "*That night*, you seemed quite depressed."

Shin swallowed nervously at his insistent hounding of the subject. *That night*. Shin had confessed his feelings to Lena, who kissed him in response and then, for whatever reason, ran off. He was incredibly confused at the time, and the depression came later.

He'd thought Lena felt the same way. How else could he have explained the kiss? But he had no guarantee that this wasn't just his own wishful thinking at play, and if she did feel similarly, then why did she run away? But if she didn't feel the same way, why would she kiss him...?

And so, his mind went in circles, and he'd remained crestfallen for the remainder of the evening. Everyone noticed the dip in his mood, of course. Raiden, Theo, Vika, Dustin, Marcel...and of course, Olivia. To be exact, they all took him to the bar that was set up in the hotel's grounds and tried to help him recover from his shock.

Incidentally, after fleeing, Lena ran to Annette in tears. Annette, exasperated, eventually left her at the bar. The other girls saw her as well—Anju, Kurena, Shiden, Grethe, and even the chief of staff. Rito and Frederica were too young to enter the bar, so they were Resonated with everyone else as they sarcastically criticized Lena.

In other words, all their acquaintances knew.

The following day, both of them had calmed down somewhat. Shin had realized that Lena ran because she was confused by his sudden words, and he decided he'd wait for her response.

Except...while he understood that Lena was busy with her duties as tactical commander now that their leave had ended...he might possibly, potentially, maybe have been upset over the fact that a month had passed, and she'd kept the whole affair up in the air.

Is now the right time for me to start sulking about that...?

Looking at Shin, who wasn't aware of the fact that he already very much was sulking, Olivia cracked a forced smile.

"I still need to handle training for the 2nd Armored Division, so I won't be able to join you on your next dispatch. But for the love of God, do something about this by the time you come back."

"If I may, Captain? Shut up," Shin spat out, his eyes narrowed.

"Well, forgive me for that, Captain Nouzen," Olivia said, flashing him a composed grin.

A mock battle between Feldreß was performed on the maneuvering grounds. The loud screeching of the power packs, the clanging of metallic legs digging into the soil, and the thundering roar of 88 mm turrets filled the premises.

It was the perfect place for a conversation one didn't want others to listen in on.

Leaving Shin, who would draw attention to himself for better and for worse, in the tent, Raiden and the other three gathered elsewhere.

"...The war might end," Anju said, holding a bottle of drinking water to her lips.

"Honestly, I never believed the day we'd say that would ever come," Raiden said.

The end of the Legion War. If they got the information they needed and discovered the existence of the hidden headquarters, it might just happen. And with that fact presented before him, Raiden was overcome with a dizzying, preposterous sort of feeling.

The war had been there since he'd been an infant. It was as constant a part of his life as the air he breathed and the sun that shone down on him. And it might just...end?

"What are we going to do if it's over?" Anju wondered with a hint of cheerfulness to her voice. "What do you think is going to happen to us?"

"Mm. Who knows, really?" Theo cocked his head in confusion. "I can't really imagine it. But hey, good for Shin, right? He said he wanted to show Lena the sea, and now it's going to happen."

“I want to show you the sea.” Kurena closed her eyes with a gentle smile as she recited the words as if they were the verse of a solemn poem. “Yeah. I hope it happens.”

A month ago at the bar, Raiden had heard Shin let slip that he’d told Lena that beneath the fireworks. He’d relayed this to Kurena, Theo, and Anju.

“...Yeah.”

Lena ended up screwing things up at the end there, but, well... Shin would be all right now. Except...

“I hate this just as much as Shin does,” Raiden said. “I don’t want to use Frederica if we don’t have to.”

Having her shoulder the fate of the Federacy...the fate of humanity. Clinging to a convenient miracle that popped out of the ether like that... How could they say they fought to the bitter end if this was how they choose to end the war?

Still, forgoing the shutdown sequence and trying to wipe out the Legion with brute force wasn’t the right idea, either. That would just result in countless avoidable deaths.

“Right. We can’t let Frederica do this alone...,” Kurena whispered. “But that doesn’t mean I want any more crazy rushes through enemy lines, where we just barely manage to take out the enemy base. I’ve had enough of walking on tightropes. Screw dying like that. But...will this really end the war?”

A miracle just falling in their laps... Her tone sounded doubtful. What if it was all one big trick?

“Maybe we won’t find that hidden headquarters. Maybe the Legion won’t listen to Frederica’s orders. Maybe this is all a trap that Zelene woman cooked up to...er, fool Shin. So I guess what I’m saying is, who knows if this’ll really go well...?”

Raiden furrowed his brow. Kurena had just mentioned all their doubts. But still, Shin, Ernst, and the Federacy’s higher-ups must have considered that, too. But the way Kurena just said that...

Theo parted his lips, smiling wryly as if to say they didn’t have a choice.

“Kurena... It almost sounds like you don’t want the war to end.”

Kurena refused to meet his gaze, looking as helpless as a lost child.

“...That’s not it.”

Having returned after a month in a training center that was closer to Sankt Jeder than the Rüstkammer base, Lena passed through the entrance gate with her old-fashioned trunk in hand.

While Shin and the Strike Package’s 1st Armored Division were

undergoing their training period over the last month, Lena had been put through the Federacy's curriculum as their tactical commander. Returning to her home base felt very much like returning home, but it was still a base belonging to a special, highly confidential unit.

She presented her ID at the gate, which swung open. She entrusted Fido, which was apparently there as a porter, with her luggage and started looking around fearfully.

It had been a month since the night of the ball in the Alliance... when Shin confessed to her under the fireworks...and she still hadn't given Shin her answer. Despite all that time, she'd still been too afraid to say it.

She'd spent the entire way back from the Alliance effectively running away from him, unable to bring herself to face him. Had it been just that, that would have been acceptable. But the fact that she'd up and left for the commander's curriculum almost as soon as she returned to the base? That probably was pretty bad.

Due to a failure in communications, Lena had learned—far too late—that she was to go through the curriculum, which was set to start the morning two days after her return. She had little time to speak with Shin, and the training center was too far from the base for her to commute back to Rüstkammer.

Because of that, she'd left her reply up in the air for over a month. Even she had to admit no excuse in the world could defend her in this situation.

She heard footsteps on the lawn—or rather, the undergrowth of the deforested woods—approach her and then stop.

“Welcome back, Lena.”

“It's good to see ya, Your Majesty.”

“Hello, Annette. Shiden... Er.”

Annette showed up dressed in a lab coat, and Shiden was dressed in her flight suit, as if she'd just left training. Lena looked around nervously... It was just the two of them. Shin wasn't there.

Even though she'd just checked to see if he wasn't there... Even though part of her was relieved that she didn't have to see him...the fact that he didn't come see her still left her anxious.

“What's Shin doing right now...?”

“I don't caaaare,” Annette said, turning her head from Lena brazenly.

“Annette...?!”

“After all those preparations. After running away from it like a chicken for so long, Shin finally confessed to you. And you didn't answer him. You ran away and hid. So I. Don't. Care.” Annette punctuated her words, pouting like a child.

“Look, I really am sorry about that. So please don't say that...!”

Annette wouldn't listen, though, so Lena turned to Shiden for help.

"Shiden...!"

"See, I told ya back then. Ya should have snuck into Li'l Reaper's room that night and pounced on him. Or you could have done it once you got back to the base. Actually, it would have been easier here. Shin's got a room all to himself."

"I—I can't do that...!"

"Don't you think that's a bit too impulsive?" Annette chimed in. "I mean, the hotel was one thing, but the walls are thin here. The other Processors next door wouldn't be able to sleep."

"The walls were even thinner in the Eighty-Sixth Sector's barracks anyway. No one's going to care about it now."

"Oh... So it's like that." Annette dropped her shoulders wearily.

She then asked a follow-up question, as if realizing something. *No one's going to care about it now?*

"Does that mean...?"

"Mm?"

"...Never mind."

If she actually heard the truth, she might become too occupied with the noise on the lower floors.

"S-so should I go to his room...?" Lena asked, her expression tormented.

"...If you have the guts to do that, you may as well just answer his confession."

"And if yer gonna say it, ya should hurry. Li'l Reaper's busy between greeting new staff and his regular meetings with Zelene. He's been going to the integrated headquarters a lot recently. Something about the army's top brass working with him to control his ability... Speaking of, you wanna come with? The transport's pretty loud, but you could answer him there."

"W-well, I'm, uh...I'm not quite ready for it yet..."

Annette and Shiden gave exasperated sighs. Fido, standing nearby, made a beeping sound that was probably its attempt at being comforting or encouraging.



Once, thoughts of racial superiority ran rampant, leading to the Eighty-Six being shut up in internment camps. But even within the Republic, where such discrimination was positively affirmed, there were people who refused to conform to those mistaken ideals.

Some sheltered the Colorata in their homes. Some stayed behind in the Eighty-Six Sector. Indeed, there were Alba who tried to save

any Eighty-Six they could. Most of these Eighty-Six were betrayed to the authorities or died in the war, with the majority of them meeting their end in the Eighty-Sixth Sector. Add to this the fact that the majority of the Republic's citizens were butchered in the large-scale offensive.

A reunion between the Eighty-Six and the few Alba who had tried to shelter them should have been rare. And yet...

"Raiden...! Ooh, I'm so glad to see you're alive...!"

"Hey, Nan," Raiden greeted the old woman. "Good to see you're still kicking."

The entrance hall of the headquarters of the Federacy's western front had a needlessly grave internal design. Seeing the old woman clinging to him in tears with this place as their backdrop, Raiden couldn't help but crack a wry smile.

Her head was lower than he remembered it being. She'd grown even older, but she was still the old woman he remembered. Even after the internment began, this old woman was a school teacher who had sheltered Raiden and his Colorata classmates.

When the Federacy's military arrived to aid the Republic, Raiden had told them about her and asked to see if they could find her. But with the country in a state of chaos after being essentially destroyed, they couldn't locate her that quickly. It took over a year for her whereabouts to be discovered.

Maybe the Federacy's army itself needed time to recover from the massive damages it had incurred during the large-scale offensive, so looking for missing persons was low on the priority list.

But loath as Raiden was to admit it, all these thoughts were just escapism. Because just a short distance away from his touching reunion, there was...

"Shin...! Oh, thank goodness, you're still alive...!"

"R-Reverend... Th-they're gonna break. My ribs, and my spine, you're gonna break them..."

A white-haired man in priestly garb held Shin in a tight embrace. He was a hulking bear of a man, his bulging muscles filling his cassock. He had his arms wrapped around Shin, holding him in a strong bear hug. The rather shocking sight made it so Raiden couldn't quite focus on the nostalgia of his own reunion.

Raiden assumed this was the Alba priest who had looked after Shin and his brother in the internment camp. Needless to say, this wasn't the image Raiden had in mind. He'd imagined him as a thin, saintly old man, not someone who looked like he could beat an Ameise to submission. Like, with a shovel.

Raiden didn't want to interrupt their reunion. Or rather, he was afraid to do so. At the urging of his self-preservation instincts, Raiden

averted his gaze from the two of them.

“Man, I’m so happy for First Lieutenant Shuga and Captain Nouzen.”

“The two guests will be part of this base as military chaplain and auxiliary teaching staff, respectively, so they can see them whenever they want... But really, they look so happy.”

“...You intend to tell me you’re honestly saying that at a time like this...?!”

As Bernholdt gave an exaggerated nod and Grethe pretended to wipe her tears off with a handkerchief, Frederica watched the reunions with horrified eyes. The two of them ignored her reaction and continued pretending like they were watching over the situation.

Neither of them wanted to get involved.

“Despite not getting any proper training, the captain always had good knowledge of tactics for an Eighty-Six and knew how to service handguns and assault rifles. I always wondered why, but with a priest like that being his guardian, I think I understand.”

“Apparently, that old priest used to be a soldier for the Republic’s national army.”

Allegedly, the priest realized that violence might be a means to defend, but not a means to save anyone, and so he gave up the military life and turned to the path of God.

“Ah, I see.” Bernholdt nodded solemnly, despite not understanding at all.

“...That explains a few things about Shin.”

Realizing how Shin was able to one-sidedly beat up Raiden and knock out Daiya despite their larger physiques, Anju watched over his hilarious...or rather, heartwarming reunion with the priest.

“I suppose Shin has noble Imperial blood, so life in the internment camps was especially hard for him. He had to learn how to defend himself...”

The Eighty-Six were bound to be drafted sooner or later, and those who were descended from the noble houses of the Empire of Giad were heavily discriminated against by their fellow Eighty-Six. Teaching Shin how to fight was likely the priest’s way of raising Shin with love.

Shiden stood next to Anju, watching Shin and the priest with shocked eyes.

“Yeah, but teachin’ him how to kill a man? The hell was that priest thinking...? If I was any less lucky, Li’l Reaper seriously would’ve killed me the first time we fought.”

“But he didn’t, so it’s fine. Believe it or not, he went easy on you.”

“I guess...” Shiden nodded.

Anju regarded her with a sidelong glance. Shiden and Shin got along like cats and dogs, but even in spite of that, Shin wouldn’t go all out against a woman. Shiden did realize this, but she wasn’t going to hide behind her gender. Anju pondered that this was probably an unspoken gentleman’s agreement of sorts between the two of them. They didn’t hate each other that much on a fundamental level.

“Besides, if you died, he wouldn’t have to worry about you attacking him again. That’s the best form of defense, isn’t it?”

“You think that’s the issue...? Oh.”

“Ah, Shin looks like he’s about to faint.”

Frederica hurried over, half in tears, along with Grethe, who finally decided it was time to intervene. The two of them separated the old priest from Shin, who seemed about ready to pass out.

As she somehow watched over that, Shiden suddenly turned a glance toward Anju with her silvery, snow-white eye.

“Don’t you have parents, too, Anju? In the Republic?”

“My father might still be alive, but...” Anju trailed off, then shrugged.

It was a subdued, casual sort of gesture, but it still somehow made him look relieved.

“I don’t really want to meet him that much... Or, well, I guess it doesn’t matter either way. Whether he’s alive or dead, that is.”

She didn’t really want him to be alive, nor did she particularly hope he was dead. And it wasn’t that she didn’t want to remember him, either. She didn’t spite or dislike speaking of her father that much, and it wasn’t as touchy a subject as one might think. She merely considered him a stranger.

What do you suppose is the missing factor that would have made us like you?

It was the question she had asked Dustin in the United Kingdom. When he wasn’t as shaken up by the sight of the Sirins’ deaths as the rest of them, when he didn’t question his very way of life.

Looking back at it, it wasn’t that she was lacking something. It was more like...

She smiled faintly, muttering to herself. Even knowing this, it was still a complicated matter. But...

“...I should wear a dress with an open back. Or a bikini.”

“...I see. So you buried Rei.”

“Yes.”

Speaking to his surrogate parent, the priest, Shin felt like he’d

gone back to being a small child again. Other than him and Lena, the priest was the only one who knew Rei when he was still alive. And he also knew about his brother's sin...which Lena didn't know, and Shin had no intention of sharing with her.

"I don't have much to base it on, but...I feel like he saved me one last time at the end, too."

When he'd completely collapsed in the Legion's territories, a Dinosauria had captured him and his friends, wandering into the Federacy's patrol lines, where it was shot down.

He'd likely saved him...even after dying twice over. He died a third time to deliver Shin and his comrades into the Federacy's borders. And he was likely prepared to be destroyed in the process.

"That's...the best thing I could have heard. I see...you've finally forgiven him."

Those were words Shin didn't expect, but upon hearing them, it felt like the priest was right. Shin wanted to forgive him. He wanted to be forgiven, and even as he knew he wasn't guilty of anything, he wanted to slay his brother's ghost. But just as much as he wanted to do that...he also wanted to forgive Rei.

"...Yes."

"That's good, then... You've really grown. And I'm not only talking about your height."

Shin looked back at the old priest, who smiled at him proudly.

"When I sent you away, I didn't think you'd return."

The priest could remember it vividly, even now. He could never forget it. The small child who had lost his parents, who had nearly been killed by his brother, made the decision to step onto the battlefield. The boy who had, by then, not only forgotten how to laugh—but he also no longer even knew how to shed tears.

"Back then, you were haunted...haunted by Rei, who had already died. The dead reside in the darkness of Hades. It seemed to me that you thought if you went after him, you'd set foot in that same abyss."

"..."

Maybe the priest was right. That very well could have happened. Shin never thought about what came next... No, he never wished to see what came next. All he wanted was to slay his brother and then snap like a blade of cold steel. He'd probably felt that way ever since that snowy battlefield two months ago.

"But you look fine now. You really have grown."

"...Hearing it from you, Reverend, it doesn't feel real."

Speaking to him made Shin feel like a child again... And the priest was so large, it didn't feel like the height gap between them had shrunk any.

"To me, you'll always be a child... So if you ever feel troubled or

need someone to talk to, you can always come to me. I am your military chaplain, after all.”

The priest raised his eyebrows jokingly, and Shin cracked a forced smile. But that did make him think. Being troubled, needing someone to speak to... He did have a dilemma at present, after all. The business with Lena, that is.

“...Then could you hear me out, Reverend?”

“Of course.”

Shin paused, thinking on how to sum up his problem...and then reconsidered.

“...Actually, never mind.”

Recent events had taught him that carrying a problem he couldn't solve on his own was no good. Or rather, that being a burden on others was a bad idea. But in this case, he felt like relying on others wasn't the right thing to do.

“Now, what's wrong? Matters of the heart, my boy?”

“...How can you tell?”

The priest laughed heartily.

“If it's a burden concerning a teenage boy, it can only be one thing... But my goodness...you've actually started thinking like a boy your age... It puts me at ease.”

He'd heard the Federacy found *that man's* family.

When he was escorted to another room, Theo realized that this wasn't a reunion like Shin's and Raiden's, where he could let other people see him. He understood why he was told that even though they had been found, they wouldn't be permitted to see him if he didn't want to.

But when he saw the person in that room, Theo was taken aback.

“...They said you knew Dad.”

A despicable citizen of the Republic, an Alba. A young boy who looked to be eleven or twelve years of age.

The captain of the first squadron Theo had been assigned to in the Eighty-Sixth Sector. A man who stayed behind and died to allow his subordinates to escape. A citizen of the Republic—an Alabaster—who had moved into the Eighty-Sixth Sector out of the belief that it was wrong to force the Eighty-Six alone to fight.

Theo had asked the Federacy's soldiers to look for his family. He'd thought it would only be right to tell them the captain fought to the very end. But...

Theo's lips trembled slightly. The man had a wife...and a child. A person he'd chosen to share his life with, a son he wanted to entrust the future to. He'd never imagined the captain had left all that behind to come to the Eighty-Six Sector.

"Where's your mother?" he managed to ask.

"The large-scale offensive..." came the boy's brief, vague reply.

"...I see."

The boy hung his head, his eyes fixed on the floral pattern on the carpet.

"She always said Dad died doing what was right. That I should be proud of him... But Grandpa and the old ladies living in the neighborhood, all my friends, their mothers... They all said Dad was doing something wrong."

For a child at that age, it was the same as having the whole world say that.

"They said he was a stupid man who threw away his homeland, his pride as a Republic citizen, and his family, all for the Eighty-Six. And then he went ahead and died for that. Everyone...kept calling Dad stupid."

Those snowy, argent eyes looked up at him almost desperately. They were the same color as the eyes of the despicable white pigs from the Republic. The exact same color as the captain's eyes... And remembering that gaze still made Theo's heart ache. Like an old wound.

"But Dad wasn't stupid, right? He did the right thing. The Eighty-Six might be a different color than us, but they're still people. So Dad helped other people...and that wasn't a stupid thing to do, right?"

"...Of course it wasn't," Theo spat out.

He wasn't trying to push the boy away; his voice was just full of exasperation. Because they simply didn't know. They didn't know how strong or jovial he was. They didn't know the last words the former bearer of Theo's Personal Mark left behind. That was the only reason they could talk that way about this boy's father.

The boy was eleven or, at most, twelve years old. He was a newborn infant when the war started eleven years ago. There was no way he could remember his father's face. He wasn't like Theo, who once knew his parents' faces but had since forgotten. This boy didn't even have the time to know the captain.

"He fought the Legion by our side and died trying to help us. No one has the right to mock him. The captain was every bit as righteous as your mother said..."

But then Theo trailed off. Was the captain...righteous? Did he live righteously? Did he...die righteously? He'd cast aside his family and came to the battlefield, knowing he might never get to see his son again. And there, he died, with his child never knowing how he fought or how he perished.

Could that be called righteousness? Would that kind of righteousness ever be rewarded?

He cast aside his present happiness and discarded any prospects he had of future joy. And all he got for it was death. He was rejected by the other Eighty-Six, Theo included, and no one ever praised his name.

Could that be called a foolish way to die?

Please. Never forgive me.

That was why, at the very end, he left those words behind as he died.

“...Anyway...no matter what anyone else says, believe in your father.”

But even as Theo said that, something in the back of his mind couldn't help but whisper coldly, berating him for his hypocrisy.

Shin, Raiden, Anju, and the others all went to greet the new military chaplain as well as the new auxiliary teaching staff. They were from the Republic, though, and so Kurena stayed behind in their home base, her feelings mixed about seeing them.

She knew there were some Alba who were good people—the priest who had raised Shin and the old woman who had sheltered Raiden, for example. And then there were Lena, Annette, and Dustin. Kurena herself would never forget that one Alba officer who had tried to save her parents. Still, she had been too young to remember his name, so she couldn't ask the Federacy to look for him.

This military chaplain and the auxiliary teacher probably weren't horrible people. But she still dreaded meeting them for the first time. She was scared... Yes, scared. Up until now, she'd always feared this. There was only one person the members of the Spearhead squadron could believe in, and that was Shin. And if not him, they could still believe in one another.

Kurena hugged her knees, burying her face in them. After all, trusting in someone else would just end the same way. Her parents, who were gunned down by mocking, jeering soldiers. Her older sister, who never returned from the battlefield. At first, she really was all alone, thrown into the Eighty-Sixth Sector's lethal battlegrounds.

It would happen again.

The Alba, people, the world itself... They were all too cruel. They'd betray her again without a second thought. So she couldn't trust anyone. She wouldn't. And that was why there was no future to look forward to. No dreams to cling to.

Wishing for a bright future was as vapid and pointless as hoping one might have a nice dream tonight. If it could happen, she'd like to see it happen. But even if she didn't...that was fine in its own way, too. That was how she felt.

“So the war...”
Probably wouldn't end, either...

Deep beneath the Strike Package's home base and near the integrated headquarters was a hidden laboratory, which had been made to accommodate Zelene. The place had also been made out of consideration for Shin, who was constantly exposed to the Legion's wailing.

After concluding his business in the integrated headquarters, Shin visited Zelene at night, where he had encountered something he'd never experienced with the Legion.

Rolling laughter.

“...Keep this up, and I'll get mad, Zelene.”

<<N-no, I mean, I do feel bad for laughing, but... Ah-ha-ha-ha!>>

Zelene was currently stored in an airtight, shielded container that inhibited and jammed all her functions, barring the ability to converse. The only way to communicate with her was through a series of low-sensitivity cameras, microphones, and speakers that were connected by wires to the container's interior...

...except that entire set was placed inside another box that had an actual face drawn over it with permanent marker. It felt like he was speaking to some kind of strange doll.

“I think I'll go back to my room now.”

<<Ah, wait, wait. I'm sorry. That was wrong of me, so let's talk a little... Heh-heh.>>

Electronic, rolling laughter spilled from the speakers again. Exasperated at Zelene's behavior, Shin glared at the cause of this conundrum. Zelene should have had no way of knowing about his rocky relationship with Lena. The fact that she knew meant someone had told her, and there was only one person who could have done that.

“You'll pay for this, Vika.”

“If you think you can make me pay, I'd love to see you try,” Vika scoffed at him, utterly amused.

<<Back to the matter at hand...,>> Zelene said, her voice still stifling some laughter.

“...No, I think we're done talking.”

<<Come now, don't pout. We have matters to discuss... That's why you came to talk to me, isn't it?>>

Zelene's voice became rather cold, as if some switch had been

flipped in her mechanical mind.

<<You came to ask me about the large-scale offensive.>>

In the Federacy, the Eighty-Six were treated as special officers—they completed the higher education an officer usually had to complete before drafting during their service. Having spent their childhood in the internment camps, they'd hardly spent any time in schools, and so they lacked much of the cultivation and education most special officer cadets their age had.

They were given schooling periods, which also doubled as vacations from their army service. But even outside those times, they were expected to attend lectures and engage in self-study, even between dispatches. This was why a study room was built in Rüstkammer base.

Lena stopped as she passed by this room, which was packed with people. Not too long ago, the only ones to study here were the captains of each squadron and their vice captains. The post of captain required authorities and duties a normal company officer lacked or couldn't deliver. As such, the captains and their vice captains were required to complete the special officer training as quickly as possible and advance to the next curriculum.

They naturally had more homework than the other Processors, and if they didn't engage in self-studying between missions, they would never be able to keep up. And so Lena thought she'd only find that small group of people in the room. But to her surprise, a large number of Processors sat at the desks, listening to the auxiliary teacher's lecture.

The ratio of Processors to non-Processors was rather high, especially given that it was around the end of dinnertime. This meant some people would still be eating, and yet there were quite a few Processors listening in.

"If you're looking for Shin, he still hasn't come back from the integrated headquarters after greeting the priest."

She heard the heavy sound of boots clicking against the floor and turned around to find Raiden.

"Really...? Ah, er, I wasn't particularly looking for Shin." Lena shook her head, flustered by the fact that he'd gotten her intentions half-right. "I was just thinking there were a lot of people at the lecture..."

"Yeah." Raiden nodded casually, as if he wasn't disturbed by Lena's odd reaction. "It's been like this since we came back from vacation... Most people didn't like this room before, though."

Raiden spoke while looking at the study room, which currently

had more than half its seats occupied. His necktie, which was normally loose, was tied around his collar properly. He had an information terminal under his arm, which doubled as both a textbook and a notebook.

“They said it feels like this room implicitly told them to stop being Eighty-Six.”

“...”

There were teachers stationed permanently in the base, and the study room’s shelves were stuffed with teaching materials. The instructors also offered career counseling and had materials prepared by the Federacy’s higher education institutions, as well as job training and career guides aimed at children and students.

The study room felt like it was made to push them out of the world that consisted only of the battlefield.

Certainly, none of the teachers or the Republic military officers who had this room built ever said anything to that vein. They only wanted the Eighty-Six to examine the future after the war and its possibilities... But having just come here, it was still too soon for the Eighty-Six to hear that wish.

But little by little, some of them were trying to see what they meant. Seeing that put Lena at ease.

“Are you on your way to class, too, Raiden?”

“I guess. About time we started thinkin’ about what’ll happen after the war ends... Besides, did ya hear about the new teacher?”

“Yes,” Lena said, then trailed off with a gentle smile. “I hear she was your old teacher.”

That explained his tie and collar, then. He was trying to look prim and proper.

“She heard I skipped classes on a few subjects, so I’m on my way to a telling-off and extra classes. She still doesn’t know when to stop talkin’, that old crone...”

He sighed, his lips curled up a bit. The old teacher apparently heard him and turned her eyes in his direction, prompting him to avert his gaze uncomfortably like a kid with his hand in the cookie jar.

“...Why don’t you join class, Lena? Theo and Kurena don’t come here too often, Anju’s electives are on a different day, and Shin’s away today. See, I...I’d rather not have to deal with the old bat alone...”

Hearing him say that like a little kid when he was that much larger than the old lady made Lena break out in laughter. When she saw him frown like a young child, Lena asked him with a smile, “Raiden...is there something you’d like to do with your life? After the war ends, I mean.”

Two years ago, back when they were still in the Eighty-Sixth

Sector, she had asked Shin the same question. Back then, all they knew about one another were their voices through the Para-RAID... when Lena didn't know the Eighty-Six had no future at the time.

She asked Raiden how he felt now. If he was happy he'd survived and got away with his life... If he could consider the future now.

For a moment, Raiden was silent. Not because he didn't want to be asked or felt like he couldn't answer... It was more like he was recalling a fond memory.

"...You know, when you asked Shin that question two years ago..."

I can't say I've thought about it too much since then.

"...at the time, he really didn't wish for anything. And it wasn't just because it was almost his time to die. It was because he was still haunted by his dead brother. Burying his brother was the only thing he had in life."

"..."

"The fact that Shin said he wanted to show you the sea, the fact that he could wish for that? That was like a miracle, Lena. Took him a lot of guts to say that. And honestly, I really want you to tap into that courage, too."

Lena felt astounded. What was this? She wanted to run. If she could, she'd have dug a hole where she stood and buried herself.

"Why do you know about that...?"

He looked at her like she was the most miserable thing in the world.

"I dunno how to break it to ya, Lena, but...I think just about everyone knows by now."

"The Federacy military discovered the weapon you described. They think it's a sign that a second large-scale offensive is coming."

If they were to disclose the Legion shutdown signal to the public, the Federacy...even humankind itself might break off into factions at worst. And so Vika and Shin decided to keep it a secret and asked Zelene to give them information they could disclose instead. What she provided was information about a second large-scale offensive the Legion was planning.

<<I'd imagine so. Since they were forbidden from using aerial weapons, the Supreme Commander units developed that weapon as a substitute. They couldn't lift the prohibition, so they decided to introduce that thing in place of an aerial bombing. I'd imagine the reconstruction is already underway. I can predict that much.>>

Shin blinked curiously. Zelene was one of the Supreme Commander units. He'd imagined she'd know.

"That wasn't definite information? You were only *predicting* they'd

make it?"

<<Research and development fall under the jurisdiction of my central processor, but matters of confidentiality do not. So I don't know any specifics...erm...about the research based on the brain samples collected from the Republic.>>

"The Sheepdogs?" Vika proposed.

It seemed the name was difficult to parse for a Legion like Zelene. Having Vika simply nod composedly at that came across as rather strange. Not that Vika being strange came as a surprise by now.

<<And the High Mobility type... No, the Phönix. Your naming sense is fascinating, I'll admit.>>

"Wait." Vika furrowed his brow. "That unit was developed under your jurisdiction? As part of the central-processor research?"

<<Yes. That was how I was able to leave you that message inside it.>>

"...?"

Vika suspiciously pondered what she'd just said. Seeing he wasn't going to ask another question, Shin began speaking again.

"Did they increase their ranks this time? We haven't received any reports of that yet."

To confirm the authenticity of Zelene's information about the second large-scale offensive, each of the countries began gathering information on the Legion forces they were facing with renewed vigor. The Federacy had asked Shin multiple times for help with their reconnaissance efforts, but he hadn't detected any noticeable increase in the Legion's numbers.

He'd considered the distance might have been a problem, but if none of the countries detected any signs of reinforcements on their fronts, things were different.

<<No. Despite increasing their numbers, the Legion failed to achieve their operation objectives in the last large-scale offensive. As such, they've decided that for the second large-scale offensive, they'd reinforce their war potential by upgrading their units and increasing their performance.>>

Like the Eintagsfliege's optical camouflage and weather manipulation. Like exchanging the Black Sheep that served as their shock troops with the more efficient Sheepdogs.

<<But unlike countries that have scarce resources, the Legion is not trying to compensate for small numbers with quality. Sad as it is to say. The first large-scale offensive wasn't just a failed battle for the Legion... Incidentally...>>

Zelene seemed more composed now.

<<...it's as I guessed. You can tell the Legion's numbers and positioning, but you can't directly see Legion from afar, can you?>>

Shin raised his head in surprise. As cooperative as she may have been, Zelene was a Legion. He couldn't let her have any more information than she strictly needed to know. Right now, he was facing a camera, a microphone, and a speaker. It was a simple communication interface that didn't allow her to so much as stir.

Vika mentioned Lena in a chat with her, but he didn't mention her name. And of course, neither of them gave her any details about Shin's power.

<<The Legion has acknowledged your existence, special hostile element Báleygr. Báleygr possesses some unknown means of highly accurate, wide-range reconnaissance, though he cannot distinguish different units. He also doesn't seem to be capable of detecting units in stasis mode... The Legion has conjectured this much. After all, you did not see through my trap in the battle for the Revich Citadel Base.>>

During the first operation on the Dragon Fang Mountain, Shin failed to recognize that the Legion's frontline troops had switched places with a heavily armored force of Dinosauria, which went on to annihilate their decoy forces. Like Zelene had said, Shin could hear the Legion's numbers and positions, but he could only guess at what types they were. This formed a flaw in his ability.

"The fact that we didn't see through your trap was a blunder on my behalf, as much as it pains me to admit it," Vika said. "But don't tell me the Legion's changed their tactics just because they're wary of Nouzen's ability?"

<<That wasn't the only reason they changed their tactics, but I wouldn't discredit it as a factor. The large-scale offensive had been planned for years, and yet you were able to anticipate it, prepare to counterattack, and eventually successfully weather it. The Legion's commander units view you in higher regard than you realize. If possible, they want to assimilate you, but more urgently than that, they want you eliminated.>>

And so...

<<As for your squadron's next operation... I won't ask where you're going. But wherever it is, be careful.>>



"First, allow me to say it's good to see you again, Nouzen. And Colonel Milizé, too."

In preparation for their next dispatch, the 1st Armored Division met in the Rüstkammer base's briefing room. Gathered there were the squadrons' commanders and their vice commanders; Lena—the operations commander—and her staff officers; as well as Vika—who would be accompanying them—and his own staff officers.

And among them, there was only one boy affiliated with the 2nd Armored Division, smiling as he sat at one corner of the elliptical

table. First Lieutenant Siri Shion. While the 1st Armored Division was on leave, two other Armored Divisions handled operational activity. One of them was the 2nd Armored Division, where he had served as the general commander for all its platoons.

Also, during the large-scale offensive one year ago, he was the captain of the Razor Edge squadron, the first defensive unit of the Republic's southern front's first defensive unit. Even after the Gran Mur was breached, they didn't enter Lena's command, forming a defensive position on their own. Siri Shion was the leader of that group of Eighty-Six.

"I'd say it's been since the United Kingdom, hasn't it? A month and some change..." Shin said, cocking his head. "I thought the 2nd Armored Division was undergoing its schooling period."

Siri shrugged, dressed in his collared student's uniform. His physique was slightly taller than Raiden's, and he had thick golden hair and eyes.

"I came here today specifically for the briefing. Kanan and the 3rd Armored Division are out on an operation, so we're the only ones in this base who've fought in the zone you're being dispatched to next—the Regicide Fleet Countries."

The Regicide Fleet Countries. They were situated to the east of the United Kingdom and to the north of the Federacy. It was a group of small countries with little territory that were nestled between the mountainous and hilly regions that spanned the two countries' borders.

When the Legion War broke out, they were invaded from the hilly regions to the east, forcing them to turn one of their countries into a defensive fortification. They gallantly kept the Legion at bay for ten years, but when all was said and done, they were only a collection of small countries.

During last year's large-scale offensive, they finally reached their limits. Once the Federacy successfully contacted them for the first time in a decade, the Fleet Countries sent a request for aid. That happened four months ago.

Siri's group was dispatched to their aid and launched three operations meant to destroy three Legion strongholds. Upon being deployed, they discovered two Legion production bases, successfully seizing them. Toward the end of their deployment period, they detected a third control base.

They attempted to seize it, but... Put simply, they failed to break through, and it was decided they would retreat.

"Your 1st Armored Division is going to be attacking that third base... I think you've already heard the story behind why we had to retreat, but I guess showing is better than telling."

A holo-screen appeared, presenting a rough optical recording. The image was mostly full of shades of blue, a large expanse of rippling water that resembled a lake, shone on by intense sunlight and rattled by strong winds. Beyond the large, angular waves, a massive metallic structure lorded over the waters like a fortress.

Their next target was situated on the water. A naval battle, the likes of which Shin had never experienced in his seven years of combat experience. But the difficulty of it all seemed trivial right now.

The image zoomed in on the top of the naval fortress. There was black armor—unusual among the Legion, which were usually steel-colored. A blue, shining optical sensor, like a will-o'-the-wisp. Two radiation wings that looked like they were woven out of silver threads stood against the backdrop of an azure sky that was all too different from the Federacy's.

And most unforgettable of all, a barrel made out of a pair of spears, like fangs bared against the heavens.

Narrowing his bloodred eyes, Shin spat out the words. Both Zelene and Ernst had told him about it, but here it was a second time. An enemy he'd never wanted to fight again.

“—A railgun.”

An 800 mm caliber turret, firing at eight thousand meters per second with an effective range of four hundred kilometers. A massive railway gun exceeding a thousand tonnes and capable moving at high velocities. The one Legion unit that had once single-handedly menaced the Federacy, the United Kingdom, the Alliance, and the Republic.

The Morpho.

A deafening silence settled over the briefing room. Shin was the only one in the room to have directly battled the Morpho, but the Eighty-Six who were in the Republic at the time all knew how menacing it was. As did Vika, who had commanded the United Kingdom's military.

Within a mere two days, it had one-sidedly destroyed four regiments and a total of twenty thousand troops along with their base. In the space of one night, it toppled the Gran Mur. It was the Legion's trump card in the large-scale offensive.

The Federacy, the United Kingdom, and the Alliance had to join forces to bring this one Legion unit down in an all-or-nothing charge through enemy lines. The many damages it invoked made the three countries reassess their policies, with the Federacy choosing to move carefully and the United Kingdom electing to stop its advance. It forced them to create the Strike Package, which attacked pinpoint

positions.

This one unit alone forced three countries to completely change their strategies.

“The Fleet Countries have designated this base the Mirage Spire. It’s located in a position three hundred kilometers off the regions of the old Cleo Fleet Country, which is now occupied by the Legion. The patrol ship that confirmed the Morpho’s position was promptly fired at and sunk. It means they know we’ve discovered them... And ever since, it’s been firing daily at the Fleet Countries’ territorial waters and any of their bases within its range.”

The Fleet Countries’ hilly land was hardly above sea level, with water flowing through their territory freely. Much of their territories consisted of wetlands, terrain that was unsuitable for mobilizing heavyweight Feldreß.

Instead, they defended their territories with multilayered defensive fortifications, as well as by building artillery formations across the many small islands that dotted their waters and maintaining a formation of battleships.

By their very organization, the Fleet Countries had an exceedingly powerful navy. With covering fire from their artillery formations, which boasted long-distance multi-rocket launchers weighing over a thousand kilograms, their ships advanced to the vicinity of the shores.

Impeded by these firm defenses, the Legion’s forces were mercilessly bombarded from their flank by onboard rocket launchers, which mowed down their forces. That was how the Orphan Fleet had been fighting the Legion off for the last decade...

The breadth of land was narrow to the north and south, with most of it being wetlands. Facing the Legion in such conditions was difficult, which was why they had to resort to such bombastic means. The navy and artillery were the crux of the Fleet Countries’ defense, which they’d barely held on to for the last ten years.

“Their marine artillery formation was annihilated over the last month. Many vessels were shot down as they crossed Legion-controlled waters, resulting in great losses. The worst part was that almost half of their land defense’s first line was within the railgun’s firing range. Soon after we retreated, the Fleet Countries had to abandon their first defensive line. They had to fall back to their second line and reserve positions. They don’t have much land as is, which means they’re effectively holding their last defensive line now.”

“And if the Orphan Fleet falls, we’ll be facing a second large-scale offensive,” Vika said indifferently. “And since the Morpho settled in quagmire terrain, where neither heavyweight Legion or Feldreß can deploy, the United Kingdom and the Federacy are powerless to stop it.”

The Fleet Countries were positioned adjacent to the United Kingdom and the Federacy, respectively to the east and north of them. They neighbored the Fleet Countries. The Morpho's four-hundred-kilometer range could cross national borders, hitting the western and northern fronts, as well as some of their cities.

Rito hung his head.

"...Do you think the Federacy's gonna send us out again, because they think we're dangerous...?"

Siri sighed and parted his lips to speak. During the large-scale offensive, when Siri refused to obey the Republic, Rito was under his command. To that end, the two of them knew each other.

"Rito, when will you learn to think before you open your mouth? You don't want everyone here to call you a crybaby, do you?"

"Stop it, Siri!"

"Also, I think I remember a few times where you called me and Captain Nouzen 'Mom' by mistake?"

"I said stop it!"

"...Shion, leave Rito alone. We're in the middle of a briefing."

Shin stopped their exchange curtly, to which Siri shrugged.

"I think I told you this in the United Kingdom, but you can just call me Siri, Nouzen. I hate my last name. Brings back memories I don't like."

He curled his faint lips into a bitter smile.

"I had a sister once. She died in battle. Of course, they couldn't bury her, so in place of a grave, I decided I'd adopt her style of speech."

"Just letting you know, this whole story about his sister is fake," Rito said.

"Come on!" Siri chided him. "You could've at least let me tease them a little longer!"

Lena's expression turned docile at the sound of Siri's story, but upon hearing it was made-up, her expression froze in an incredulous manner. Siri, meanwhile, eyed Rito with contempt for exposing him.

"Man... You know how in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, everyone was like a pack of dogs? Deciding who the captain would be or settling disputes with fistfights? Well, I hate that."

Siri spat those words out bitterly. He was taller than Raiden, and his limbs were long and toned like whips. He looked like he'd be the strongest out of everyone here, but his words seemed to deny that barbaric approach.

"We're not dogs. We're people. So we can't forget that we shouldn't hit other people on a whim. That's how I feel, but my body's a little too suited for fighting... So I decided I'd talk a little more calmly and avoid fights. After five years of speaking like that, I've

gotten used to it.”

He waved his hand dismissively and then continued.

“Anyway... I’m sorry you have to clean up our mess. Neither us nor the Orphan Fleet can afford to charge a long-distance cannon with a four-hundred-kilometer range without a plan.”

“That’s why the Orphan Fleet hasn’t been urging the Federacy to redeploy the Strike Package despite having been backed into their final defensive line for a month. They need to prepare, too. They’re waiting for the right chance.”

A young female officer in a dark-violet uniform took over the conversation for Siri. She was Vika’s lieutenant, who had been deployed to the Fleet Countries in his place, leading an Alkonost unit alongside the Strike Package’s 2nd and 3rd Armored Divisions.

“In other words, they’re preparing to break through the Morpho’s four-hundred-kilometer range. Please look at this.”

As she rose to her feet in a single, practiced motion, she waved a hand, opening a holo-window. As she presented the data, Siri spoke to her casually.

“Go ahead, Major Zashya.”

Zashya turned around to face Siri like a spring-loaded doll.

“...! How many times must I ask you to stop calling me a little rabbit...?!”

For some reason, she was half in tears. Incidentally, Zashya was only slightly taller than Frederica and had a very slender physique. She wore her reddish-brown hair in pigtails, and her violet eyes were hidden behind a pair of round glasses. She had the distinct colors of a pureblood Amethysta, but she gave off an incredibly timid impression that almost seemed to spite the United Kingdom’s values that the nobility was obligated to serve in the army.

“But everyone in the United Kingdom calls you Zashya...”

“Th-they do, but that’s because His Highness keeps—”

“Both your first and last names are long and cumbersome to pronounce, especially for foreigners,” Vika said casually. “You’re going to have to deal with it.”

“Yes, but I’ve repeatedly asked you to call me Roshya instead...! Everyone, please call me that!”

Zashya looked around the briefing room desperately, and everyone—Shin and Lena included—averted their gazes awkwardly. Like Vika said, her real name was too long and hard to pronounce for Lena, the Eighty-Six, and the Federacy’s staff officers. They assumed a short, casual nickname wouldn’t be too impolite.

Vika simply urged her to continue with another shrug.

“...By your will. I shall now explain the situation.”

She switched the holo-screen’s image, which now showed an

image of the Fleet Countries' shore regions and the sea extending to the north of it. There was a red dot in the middle of the sea, signifying the Mirage Spire base, and around it...

"Like First Lieutenant Siri explained, the Mirage Spire base is a fortress built on the waters three hundred kilometers off the shores of the Legion's territories. The Orphan Fleet retained control of the waters after the war's beginning, so it's estimated that after the other coastal countries that weren't part of the Orphan Fleet fell, the Legion used their harbors to build it."

At present, the Federacy has confirmed the situation of other countries in a very small range, spanning from the north-central regions of the continent to the west and south. Communications failed to reach the eastern countries, since they were separated by a vast hammada desert and a wall of Eintagsfliege, which was thicker than any other spot they'd seen on the continent.

"Before the war, the Orphan Fleet was planning to mine an underwater ore vein. The Mirage Spire was built atop that site. There was also an underwater volcano they were planning to use as a source of geothermal energy, and the Legion took advantage of it, too, likely for production purposes. And..."

She furrowed her beautiful, slanted eyebrows behind her glasses further.

"...as has already been explained, and as you can see...there is nothing around that base. No natural or man-made structures that stand above sea level."

As they studied the map, they saw that there wasn't so much as a single island for several kilometers around the Mirage Spire base. The only resources the base could access were the underground ore vein and volcano—which meant there was nothing else in the area. Even though they'd be approaching the base under bombardment from a long-distance cannon with a four-hundred-kilometer range, they would have nowhere to hide.

"That's why the Orphan Fleet is waiting for a storm. It's why they haven't launched an attack despite them having to hang on to their crumbling defenses for a month now. During this time of year, at the end of summer, large storms tend to blow in from the north. They're hoping they can breach the Morpho's bombardment zone by hiding under the cover of one of those storms."

Since the open ocean offered no cover or obstructions, they hoped the large waves and the rain and wind of a storm would allow them to avoid detection for long enough. *Hiding in a storm is easy enough to say...* Tilting her head, Lena asked, "But if we're going to cross through the storm—"

"An ordinary ship wouldn't cut it, no. The waves will be rough,

especially that far from the shore. Even a fighter jet isn't guaranteed to fly through that type of storm and return to base safely. Like I've said, they're waiting for a chance and making preparations. Said chance is the storm, and the preparations are what they will need to cross it. In other words, if a normal ship can't go through it, they'll need to prepare an extraordinary battleship."

The holo-window's image changed again. It now showed a flattop silhouette that didn't quite fit the description of a battleship. Its bridge was located at the portside of the ship as opposed to the center of the hull, resulting in what was called an island environment bridge. It also had a level flight deck with a long highway and a catapult.

Two mounts for four 40 cm naval turrets were set up a bit farther away than usual from the flight deck, so as to not get in the plane's way as it took off. At the very top of the bridge was a figurehead in the shape of a woman, which dully reflected the sunlight.

"A supercarrier. For this mission, the Strike Package will be ferried by the Orphan Fleet's prided, leviathan-hunting battleship."

CHAPTER 2

MOBY-DICK; OR, THE WHALE

Beneath a thick, gloomy, clouded sky was the black, leaden surface of the sea. Jagged ebony rocks littered the reef-filled coast as the melancholic roar of the ocean blotted out the cries of the seabirds. In the distance, one could see the wreckage of battleships stacked together in heaps as they lined the panorama.

“...I guess that’s the sea,” Shin said, looking away from his first view of the ocean.

“No, ’tis not! Not like this!” Frederica raised her voice, stamping her feet in protest.

I want to see the sea.

Whenever that thought crossed her mind, Frederica imagined a blue, sparkling sea beneath a bright, sunny sky, or white shores full of coral remains. Sea spray reflecting the sunlight and palm trees, beautiful flowers surrounded by the cheerful chirping of gulls.

The sea being black wasn’t due only to the dark clouds, incidentally. It was because of the rocks and sand at the ocean’s bottom, which meant that even in fine weather, the seawater here would still be black. It would always be black. And since the water’s temperature was freezing year-round, they couldn’t swim in it, either.

“And what is this rotten smell in the air?! What is the meaning of this...this stench...?!”

“Isn’t it supposed to smell like salt? I don’t really know, though.”

He’d read something to that effect at one point, but he wasn’t actually sure. Even if he did run into the scent of the salty sea, he wouldn’t recognize it.

“...Ugh. Finally, we are at sea, but I know not what to do...!”

Frederica spoke with tears in her eyes as she glared reproachfully

at a wave loudly crashing against the rocks. She felt as if her expectations had been thoroughly dashed, and she had nowhere to let out those pent-up emotions.

“Are you satisfied with this?!” she asked Shin angrily. “Did you not tell Vladilena that you wished to show her the sea?! To see it alongside her?! Surely, this is not the sea you imagined!”

“I’ll admit this wasn’t exactly what I was expecting...,” Shin said, then turned to look at someone standing in the distance.

They still hadn’t spoken since.

“But Lena seems happy with this either way.”

Looking ahead, he could see Lena struck speechless, her pale face beaming as she watched the waves rise and fall. Appreciating her reaction through a sidelong glance, Shin couldn’t help but crack a smile himself.

“You two... You truly are...”

From far away, they could hear a “song”—like the blowing of a thin, silvery flute, riding gently along the waves.

“That ‘singing’ from earlier was from one of the largest specimens. The cry of a fifty-meter class, just like *this girl*. Hearing it isn’t unusual in the Fleet Countries, but you’re quite lucky to catch it on your first day here.”

They stood in the lobby of a military base, which was originally a museum attached to the naval university. It was requisitioned at the start of the war and converted into a base.

Standing in the center of the lobby was one jovial officer, wearing an indigo-navy uniform with crimson lining. He had a beautiful tattoo of a firebird spreading its wings etched onto his face. It extended from his forehead, ran along the edge of his left eye, and traveled all the way down to his cheekbone.

His serene voice rang out sonorously in the salty sea breeze. His skin was tanned, and his bright-brown hair seemed like it was faded by sunlight. He had a Jade’s faint-green eyes, which were probably his natural-born color.

And yet the Strike Package’s eyes weren’t fixed on him. Their attention was arrested by the *large object* suspended imposingly—though perhaps a bit less so by how cramped it looked—from the navicular ceiling.

It was a massive skeleton of a beast, far too large to exist on land in modern times.

“Hunting this girl is our Orphan Fleet’s proudest accomplishment—or so I’d like to say, but she died of natural causes and drifted ashore. They also caught a lot of fish and ate them with oil when they

picked her up. A pretty good day for them, all in all. The scholars really struggled to get the skeleton packed and preserved, though.”

Its long spine extended like a thousand-year-old tree, resembling a dragon in shape, carrying with it a rib cage wide enough for a person to reasonably live in. It had a long neck, which was connected to a jagged skull.

Even when reduced to a skeleton, its sheer size and majesty was overwhelming. Shin thought he'd seen a similar creature's skeleton once before. It was long before he had been sent to the internment camp, in some museum. A sample of a large creature, whose bones he had once mistaken for a dragon's...

“We loaned her to the Republic of San Magnolia's royal museum before the war, so some of you may have seen her before. If you have, don't be shy and raise your hands. Come now!”

Apparently, it wasn't just similar. It was the very same skeleton. Shin held his tongue, however, and no one else raised their hand. The museum in question was in *Liberté et Égalité*, which had a predominantly Celena population. The majority of the people present in this room were Eighty-Six, and their families wouldn't go there.

The Orphan Fleet officer looked amazed.

“My, that's strange... The little ones are usually more excited to see it. Oh well. Anyway, her name is Nicole. Feel free to call her Nikki, though. Even a leviathan isn't as scary when it's just a skeleton like this, right?”

This creature was called a leviathan. A belligerent marine animal that reigned supreme in the deep, dark seas—especially the open seas around the continent's shores—since before recorded history. To be exact, it was a species of such hostile marine creatures.

Even as humankind spread throughout the continent, the leviathans remained the supreme rulers of the ocean, refusing to vacate their watery throne by impeding voyages out to sea. That remained true to this day, when humans came in steel crafts loaded with weapons. Any weapon and platform produced by humankind were a target for the leviathans' ire.

That was why humankind couldn't use any waters that were beyond the coastal areas. All sea trade and transport routes, the operation of fishing boats, and the deployment of military vessels were limited to a small area of water near the shores.

The sea wasn't the world of humanity. Humankind couldn't leave the continent. And only one country saw that fact as unacceptable—and deemed it unacceptable still.

“So, with that said, I will be working alongside you this time. Captain of the *Stella Maris*, the flagship of the Regicide integrated navy's Orphan Fleet. Call me Ishmael Ahab. You can feel free to call

me Captain Ishmael, Colonel Ishmael, or Uncle Ishmael. Not Captain Ahab, though. That's what we called my late old man...the fleet commander."

And that zone was the Strike Package's next dispatch site, the Regicide Fleet Countries. A cluster of countries borne from a fleet of battleships that sought to conquer the seas and exterminate the leviathans.

In the past, seafaring tribes existed across the shores of the continent. The last eleven of those tribes formed the eleven Fleet Countries, which developed the only fleet in the continent capable of taking to the open seas, with a flagship built to oppose the leviathans.

Shin and the Strike Package had gathered in this hall to receive the outline of the coming operation from him. Behind him stood a slightly older woman, who parted her lips. She was also perfectly clad in an indigo-navy uniform and had a red tattoo in the shape of scales over her dark skin.

"It's about time you wrap up your little chat, *Brother*. The Strike Package's members might leave if you don't hurry."

"Oh, sorry, sorry. I just thought we should introduce good old Nikki first... Ah, this composed beauty right here is my younger sister and deputy, Lieutenant Esther. You can feel free to call her Estie... Oops."

Lieutenant Esther glared at him wordlessly, which made him duck his head.

A young officer of mixed L'asile and Orienta heritage with a peony tattoo carried in a white board, setting it behind them and leaving wordlessly.

"All right, let's give you the outline, then. Our open-sea fleet will ferry you over to the Mirage Spire base, so you guys are to take over the fortress and destroy the Morpho. That is all."

"..."

A strained...or rather exasperated silence settled over the Eighty-Six. As if they were wondering if this man was really in the position to command anyone. Lena chimed in to supplement his explanation.

"The Mirage Spire is located near the open sea, which borders the leviathan's territory. Neither the Federacy nor the United Kingdom have vessels capable of sailing through these waters. As such, the Strike Package will be relying on the supercarrier and its fleet for ferrying and protection over the sea."

With the supercarrier as its crux, the open-sea fleet was a convoy of long-distance cruisers weighing ten thousand tonnes, six-thousand-tonne anti-leviathan vessels, scout vessels optimized for tracking the leviathans' movements, as well as supply ships.

Before the Legion War, each of the eleven Fleet Countries had a

fleet of their own, and those eleven fleets populated the northern seas. Since the start of the war, those fleets were employed for the sake of defending the land, with many of them sunk and each fleet only having a few ships remaining...

Hence the integrated fleet, Shin thought as he recalled Ishmael's introduction. None of the eleven fleets had enough remaining ships to operate on its own, and so they gathered their ships together, forming a large integrated fleet: the Orphan Fleet.

Lieutenant Esther continued, using magnets to attach the operation map to the white board. At the bottom of the map was the coastline of the Fleet Countries. At the center was a red dot marking their objective. The majority of the map was colored blue, though, symbolizing the sea.

"The Orphan Fleet will handle your trip to the objective and back, and it'll also create a diversion. The Morpho is currently estimated to have a range of four hundred kilometers. By comparison, the Orphan Fleet's maximal cruising speed is thirty knots."

"When converted to ground units of measurements, it comes to... fifty kilometers per hour."

"Huh. That's slow."

"Who just said that?! I'll beat you silly. Do you have any idea how many tonnes the supercarrier weighs? We're talking five digits here. Don't expect it to go as fast as your little daddy-longlegs Feldreß when it doesn't even weigh ten tonnes."

"Brother, I understand how you feel, but we need to move things along. Please back down," Lieutenant Esther said.

"Second Lieutenant Oriya, that was out of line," Lena chided Rito.

"Sorry."

Seeing Ishmael and Rito both fall silent, Esther paused as if to recall what she was going to say and then continued:

"...Yes, so maximal speed of thirty knots. In other words, it would take us seven hours to breach the Morpho's bombardment range in a straight line and reach the Mirage Spire base. As we do, two of the integrated navy's general fleets will set sail beforehand to draw the Morpho's fire from us and attempt to approach the Mirage Spire."

Esther placed a transparent cover over the map and began writing on it. Two lines from the shore to the Mirage Spire—likely at the shortest distance from their home port. She then took a different colored pen, drawing a line from the Orphan Fleet's home base to the north and then changing directions to the southeast, heading for the Mirage Spire.

"Before the diversion begins, we will stealthily set sail. We'll sail north along the edge of the bombardment range, docking at the Flightfeather archipelago. After the enemy begins engaging the

diversion fleet, we'll enter the bombardment range while hiding within the storm. In other words, we will be waiting for the storm to come and begin the operation as soon as it does."

"Incidentally, the Legion aren't capable of naval combat, so we won't have to worry about fighting any other Legion except for the Morpho..." Ishmael added. "Or at least, the Orphan Fleet hasn't detected any naval Legion types over the last decade of fighting."

Esther nodded.

"As unfortunate as it is, our country is a small one. We believe that rather than trying to create effective weapons against us in the north, the Legion decided to sink their resources into developing effective methods for combating the Federacy and the United Kingdom."

"The sad reality of things is that even without producing any naval units, they're still giving us enough trouble as it is."

"..."

This was a joke that left foreigners like the Strike Package at a loss for how to respond. *That was probably why there weren't any naval Legion types, however...* Shin cocked his head slightly and raised a question.

"But...there are a few small Legion groups out at sea. Based on how they're moving, I'm guessing they're patrol groups. What about them?"

"Mm? Oh... I see. You're the one the rumors were about."

Ishmael gazed at Shin in puzzlement for a moment, before nodding in realization. Apparently, he'd heard of Shin's ability.

"Those aren't naval units; they're mother ships for launching advance recon units. The Morpho needs them to accurately shoot at any approaching vessels. I'm sure you know this already, but the Rabe can't remain airborne over the sea."

Lena turned to face Shin in surprise, but he simply nodded. The reason for that was unclear, but there weren't any Rabe units over the sea. The Morpho was a long-distance cannon without anything to guide it. Its accuracy wasn't high.

This wasn't like the large-scale offensive, where it was firing salvos at large, clear, and fixed targets that couldn't evade its shots, like bases and fortresses. This time, it was up against moving targets on the large, vast sea. If it was going to hit any small ships without a Rabe to assist it, it would need advance recon units.

"The diversion fleet will handle distracting and sinking those recon-unit ships, as well, so you don't need to worry about them. You've got nothing to worry about to begin with; the supercarrier isn't going to sink, no matter what."

Maybe Ishmael decided there was no point explaining marine

maneuvers to child soldiers who had never experienced naval combat. Maybe it was some kind of pride, as if to say naval combat was the Orphan Fleet's field and they should just leave it to them. He even skimmed over the topic of their transportation on the way to the base and smiled cheerily.

"The Orphan Fleet is very grateful to have you here, Eighty-Six. And that's why...we swear it on the Stella Maris's name: We will return the Strike Package to safety, no matter the cost."

The requisitioned university's dorms served as the Strike Package's barracks for the duration of the mission. Its corridors' floors were lined with tile mosaics in an ancient design typical to the far south.

Theo wandered through these corridors alone after the lights went out. He ran into Rito, who left what looked like an office with a bundle of thin paper booklets under his arm.

"...What are you doing here?"

"Ah, Second Lieutenant Rikka."

Perhaps Rito had grown taller, because Theo got the impression that his eyes were closer to his than they were a few months ago.

"Well, you see, I figured they might have a few more left over, so I came in to ask, and they did. I thought that even if they're not useful now, they'll be good for when the war ends," Rito said, speaking quickly. "They said they'll be recruiting from outside the country, too."

"...Rito, I get that it was my fault for asking you out of nowhere, but could you sort out your thoughts before you talk instead of saying things as soon as they come to mind?"

"Ah, yes, sir. I've been hearing that a lot recently. Er... The university here has a senior high school attached to it. These are study materials for it. I figured I'd take them back to the base's study room so the people who didn't come here could read them, too."

Rito's face then lit up.

"But did you see that?! The leviathan! That thing's amazing! It's like a real monster!"

Theo recalled that Rito was one of the younger Processors. When some of the bigwigs gave them comics or movies or cartoons, he would watch them religiously. Monster films were some of his favorites, apparently.

Theo thought it was heartwarming. And honestly, he and a lot of the older Processors did like that kind of entertainment, too, given that they hadn't had access to anything like it since they were little children.

"So you want to work in something that involves the leviathans?"

After the war ends.”

“I just thought it might be cool. It sounds fun.”

“You’ve really started thinking about all sorts of things, haven’t you?”

“All sorts of things” included wanting to dig up fossils in the Alliance and wanting to invent a flying bike.

“Ah, yeah. I mean, I...” He trailed off, as if in thought. “First Lieutenant Rikka, do you know Ludmila? One of the Sirins. Tall, with red hair?”

“...Yeah.”

Tall, with red hair...

Come now, everyone. By all means.

It was like a chilling presentation of the end that awaited the Eighty-Six. They were different from the Sirins. They knew that. But it felt like, just like the Sirins, their deaths might go unrewarded.

“What about Ludmila?”

“During the Dragon Fang Mountain operation, I was in the same squad as her. At the time, I was still scared of the Sirins, but then she started talking to me.”

It occurred to Theo that Rito really did stop being terrified of the Sirins at some point.

“She told me to be happy. To live as I want. And I...I think I realized. The Sirins, they...they were just worried about us in their own way.”

The glow of the old light bulbs lit up his golden eyes. Agate eyes, like those of a thoughtful, innocent animal.

“They were concerned for us. In the Eighty-Sixth Sector, they told us to die, but things are different here. The Federacy wants us to study, and that’s a chore, but that’s only because they’re trying to tell us to live however we want, right? So we can do anything we’d like and go wherever we want.”

Go wherever you want. See whatever you wish. Do whatever you’d like. Once the war ends. Or even if it doesn’t end, and you leave the army. That’s...

“That’s something we can wish for. In the Eighty-Sixth Sector, all we had was pride. We had nothing else, and we didn’t want anything else. But now it’s different... I understand that, so I want to wish for all sorts of things.”

All the things he couldn’t wish for in the Eighty-Sixth Sector. The many things he was deprived of.

Theo listened to his words, dumbfounded. He’d thought Rito had grown taller, but it wasn’t just that. At some point, he’d become capable of thinking and saying these kinds of things.

Rito was...trying to leave the Eighty-Sixth Sector.

And that left Theo dumbfounded. He was happy that Shin had learned to wish for the future. He saw Raiden and Anju were trying to move on, too, and he was pleased with that as well. But it wasn't just them. It was Rito, too. And there were probably so many of them going through the same thing. Theo just didn't notice.



They were leaving the battlefield.

Rito looked at him with a carefree smile, unaware of the shock Theo was in.

“So for now, I want to examine all sorts of options... Our operations take us all over the continent, so I may as well bring the interesting things back for everyone to see.”

<<...You intend to try reading a Shepherd's central processor to expose the secret headquarters' position?>>

Shin had assumed she might have information pertinent to the operation, but she didn't have any communication features she could use. And so he had Zelene's container brought along with the 1st Armored Division, disguised as a munitions container.

The container itself sat in a hidden cargo space within the transport vehicle. Since anything regarding the shutdown measure had to be kept from the ears of anyone else, Shin had to find the right time to visit her.

<<So basically, you're gambling on the possibility that someone from the Imperial faction or a high-ranking officer is a Shepherd. There are probably other ways you could discover the position, though. The Federacy's adopted quite the cold-blooded approach itself, I see.>>

“Is it possible?”

<<There are certainly Shepherds who were originally part of the Imperial faction.>>

Shin had some mixed feelings about that answer. A certain sense of conflict had been smoldering within him ever since Zelene told him about the shutdown measure. He did want the war to end. But the method Zelene told him for ending the war and discovering the hidden headquarters... He just couldn't help but feel something wasn't right.

<<Their names and deployment points are— Warning. Violation of prohibited article— No good. I can't verbalize it.>>

And that was why part of him was relieved when Zelene's voice suddenly turned cold and emotionless, cutting her own words off. He didn't want to sacrifice Frederica. Fighting to the very end meant relying on their own strength until the very end of the war. It didn't mean clinging to a miracle.

And on top of that...while they might be the enemy, Shin didn't want to view the Shepherds—the ghosts of the war dead—as mere mechanical parts.

<<Either way, the Legion do possess the information the Federacy seeks. And as for reading the information from their central processors... If nothing else, *that is how we Shepherds*

exist.>>

Their memories—the information stored within their brain—was read and transferred into another vessel. It shouldn't be impossible, both theoretically and technologically... If it was possible, then someday... There was something Shin felt he had to confirm at some point.

<<However, there are other ways that don't require you to be fixated on finding the Imperial faction's Shepherds. For example, said orders are transmitted to the commander units in each base through a communications satellite. Should that satellite be destroyed, the closest Rabe units should come in to cover and compensate—>>

“Zelene. Before that...there's something I'd like to ask.”

<<Mm? What is it?>>

This was a doubt he'd been harboring since his initial conversation with Zelene. And this was why he'd been afraid of the idea that his ability might allow him to speak with a Shepherd. The truth behind what might be his sin.

“You can hear my voice. And being a Shepherd, you can understand what I'm saying, too. Does that hold true for other Shepherds?”

It felt as if Zelene intended to cock her to one side but couldn't.

<<Yes. Though, that said, it's faint. It's probably because you are right in front of me, and there are no other Legion units in the vicinity... So this doesn't mean your presence exposes where you might be attacking or where your unit is deployed.>>

“That's not what I meant...”

He didn't want to ask that question. He didn't, and he didn't want to hear the answer, either. But he had to ask.

“If they could hear and understand me, and we had a means of mutual understanding, like you and me right now, would it be possible I'd be able to speak with other Shepherds?”

To fight, kill, and bury. He always thought he had no choice but to do that. But what if they didn't really have to kill and meaninglessly hurt each other? What if they could peacefully converse and reach a mutual understanding?

He'd once thought he was hated, that they could never understand each other. But at the very last moment, his brother's burning, illusory hand delivered a single, final word. He'd heard his true feelings.

Could he have avoided that cruel final farewell?

“Could I have spoken...with my brother...?”

Zelene fell silent for a moment.

<<...I see. You had a brother. A family member who had been assimilated by the Legion.>>

He gave a small nod... He couldn't muster up the words to tell her what happened. Not now.

<<And you defeated him. The Shepherd who was your precious brother.>>

“...Yes.”

<<I see...>>

It felt as if she'd fallen into contemplative silence. After a moment, she spoke softly.

<<Before I answer your question, let me ask you something in turn... Am I human?>>

It was Shin's turn to fall silent.

“Well—”

That was a question Lerche had once asked him. And at the time, he couldn't give an answer. If he was asked whether Lerche or Zelene were human or not, he couldn't confidently say yes to either. His ability to hear the wailing of their ghosts coldly confirmed that fact. Zelene was not human. She was not alive. She was a ghost— No, even less than that. She was the ruined remains of a ghost.

But Shin couldn't bring himself to do it. He couldn't tell her, to her face, that she wasn't human. He simply couldn't.

Zelene apparently noticed his conflict, and somehow, he could sense her smile.

<<You're sweet.>>

“...”

<<You're a good boy. If possible, I'd love to be your friend. I truly feel that way. But neither I nor your brother can befriend you anymore. And you understand why, don't you? It's because...>>

...They were Legion.

<<The only reason I can converse with you is because I am restrained. Because all my sensors are sealed. In terms of my sensors, I can't even acknowledge that you're right in front of me. If I did... If I acknowledged that there was a human being standing in my vicinity... I would not be able to retain enough of my reasoning to hold a conversation. That's what becoming a Shepherd means. You become a machine for slaughter. You may have a human personality, but you're still a monster, driven by destructive impulses.>>

In the United Kingdom, it was Zelene's hand. In the Eighty-Sixth Sector, it was his brother's hand. Hands extended in malice and bloodlust. But in the moments before he was destroyed, his brother's hand was gentle.

<<That's true for me as well. You're a kind boy, and I wish to befriend you. And that is *precisely why* I feel the urge to kill you.>>

At that moment, Zelene's voice was indeed full of bloodlust. The Legion's unique, artificial bloodlust. The irrational bloodlust of an autonomous killing machine, which didn't need reasons or justifications for killing humans.

<<And it holds just as true for your brother. As a Shepherd, your brother could do nothing but try to kill you. His instincts as a murder machine bid him to kill any human he faced, and he was powerless to oppose them. And while you might be capable of restraining an Ameise, you would not have been able to keep a Dinosauria captive. So let me tell you this... You did not make a mistake.>>

Shin looked up in shock. Zelene was inside the container and not before his eyes, but...he thought he could feel a pair of kind eyes look into his own.

<<You thought you might have been able to spare him, didn't you? That's why you asked me. Very well, then. I'll answer your question. You couldn't have. You had no choice but to fight your brother. There was no way that your brother could have survived and lived alongside you. That fact had been etched into stone the moment your brother became a Shepherd... You did not lose him due to any mistake or negligence of your own.>>

It wasn't your fault.

<<It was true back then, and it will continue to be true. The only way you have of dealing with the Legion...is by defeating us, and putting us to sleep.>>

Grethe nodded within the holo-window, having received Lena's report.

"Good work... I'm sorry, Colonel Milizé. I had to leave those rascals in your care."

"Not at all. After all, you're in charge of getting in touch with our next destination, the Holy Theocracy of Noiryannaruse."

This time, Grethe did not accompany the 1st Armored Division nor the 4th Armored Division, which was assigned to the southern front to attempt to restore communications with the southern countries.

While two of the Strike Package's Armored Divisions were on active duty at any one time, they could both be deployed to the same destination, or they might be dispatched to two different regions, like now.

In other words, things were bad enough that they had to wear themselves thin. Lena furrowed her fair brow.

"I've heard we've been receiving incessant requests to deploy, but I didn't think things were that bad everywhere else..."

She'd seen it when she stepped onto the Fleet Countries' battlefield. Defensive perimeters that looked like they were on the verge of collapsing from severe attacks. Understaffed, exhausted soldiers. The terrible spectacle of the wreckage of sunken ships, littering the impoverished cities and the coastline.

It made sense that they appealed for help as soon as the Federacy managed to restore communications with them. They'd been in desperate need of help, even if it were a force on the scale of the Strike Package.

"It's been ten years. Not many countries can sustain constant combat for that long."

"..."

Only large countries like the United Kingdom and the Federacy, or countries protected by natural fortresses like the Alliance, had a large distance between the front lines and their home front. This place was different.

But that made Lena wonder. Even if that was the case, why? The Fleet Countries and the Holy Theocracy, and any other country that had restored communications, were all asking for military aid. Even though they'd withstood the fighting for a decade and barely made it through last year's large-scale offensive. It was as if in the year since the large-scale offensive, something had happened that made the war situation significantly worsen...

Grethe then gave a dry cough, as if to do away with the suffocating silence.

"By the way, Colonel? I think there's another report you forgot to make."

"Huh?!"

Lena hurriedly rummaged through her memory, while Grethe beamed at her.

"Did you give Captain Nouzen your answer? How did it go?"

Her own superior officer was breathing down her neck about this, too?!

"I-I-I-I'm not sure what you're talking about!"

"Keeping a boy on his toes is a girl's privilege, but if you leave him in suspense for too long, he'll get fed up with you. I'll have you know the captain looked very depressed after the whole thing happened."

Grethe then trailed off, grimacing as if she was thinking back on some unpleasant memory. Lena stood in front of the holo-window, her face red as a beet. She wished she could bury herself.

"Looking at his face almost made me feel bad for that killer mantis... Which reminds me. Willem joined us on that trip for a reason. I wonder what became of that."



"You mentioned an information leak through the Sensory Resonance in the United Kingdom..."

Since the research division had no role in the next mission, they stayed behind in the Strike Package's home base, Rüstkammer. Sitting in her office, Annette spoke, viewing her guest suspiciously.

She wasn't very familiar with him, and he was visiting her outside work hours. But more important than that...

"I've already given my report that the leak wasn't from the Para-

RAID, Chief of Staff Ehrenfried.”

“Yes, I remember. However... How about this, Henrietta Penrose?”

He gazed back at her with a thin smirk, his eyes glinting like blades.



An attack operation on a naval fortress three hundred kilometers off the shore loomed ahead of them. There was no hope for any support from their allies, and it was a reckless charge into enemy lines. These could very well be the final days of the Eighty-Six.

But they did not spend them brooding. Quite the opposite—they went out to town together and went to play by the sea. Life in the Eighty-Sixth Sector was always spent teetering on the edge of death. The battlefield was their homeland. Having lived their lives between one battle and the next, they often longed for the simplicities of life.

Besides, for the majority of them, it was their first time seeing the sea. Even for those who were lucky enough to be born by the sea, it was their first time on the northern shores. Yes, to them, war was the daily routine. And while they did steel themselves for what was to come, they didn’t let their nerves deprive them of what pleasures they had.

They would peer into the waters, following the movements of the fish. When a fish would surface, they would run away, realizing it was bigger than they thought. They would scare away the seabirds flocking about and pick small fish and crabs out of the tide pools. They weren’t familiar with how people usually played at the beach, but they didn’t need to know much to enjoy themselves.

Standing with his back to that cheerful clamoring, Shin stood wordlessly on one of the rocks, gazing out at the boundless sea before him.

No matter how many times I look at it, it’s...

Raiden, who stood next to him, just as entranced by the sight, didn’t hide his sense of wonder.

“...This is amazing. It really is just water, as far as the eye can see.”

Thankfully, that day, the clouds had cleared away, and the sun was out. The pale-blue northern sky and the color of the sea weren’t as dark as they were the day prior. From the misty horizon in the distance, the cries of the seabirds somehow sounded like the meowing of cats.

Incidentally, Lena felt bad about leaving her actual cat, TP, behind yet again, and so she brought him with her on this dispatch. He was

currently loitering about in Lena's room. Similarly, Fido, which was displeased at having been left behind for their trip to the Alliance, ignored Shin's direct order to stay put and followed them to beach. It was currently helping Rito and Marcel fish.

"And all this water's got that taste, too. I wouldn't believe it if it wasn't right in front of me..."

"You tasted it?" Shin asked him, thinking Raiden wasn't some kind of child.

All he got in return, however, was awkward silence. Apparently, he actually gave in to curiosity and licked some of the water.

"What did it taste like?"

"Like salt... Or, well, it kind of tasted fishy, too. You know how their local product is salted fish eggs? It was like that, but thinner," Raiden said, then grimaced. "You actually thought that stuff was good? I thought it was weird, honestly."

Shin was puzzled by that question. Those red, salted fish eggs were brought onto their table in their stationed base's cafeteria, along with jam and butter. Apparently, it was a traditional preserved foodstuff in the Fleet Countries. Most people thought it was strange and refused to eat it, but Shin heeded the staff's recommendation and gave it a try.

"Not really? It wasn't particularly bad."

Though he had to admit he couldn't call it entirely tasty, either.

"...Your tongue's as screwed up as you are, man..."

Frederica, who was picking up seashells nearby, butted into their exchange.

"Putting aside Shinei's lacking sense of taste, I would say in this case, it's very much a matter of preference. I, for one, found it quite palatable."

"Yeah, you were pigging out back there. You put a whole lot of sour cream on your toast." Raiden nodded.

"Yeah, and toast wasn't the only thing you were devouring back there," Shin appended, likewise nodding.

"Ugh, how dare you speak of a lady in such a manner!" Frederica snapped at them, her face flushed. "T-true, I have gained some weight, but that is merely because I am at the height of my growing period!"

They hadn't meant to tease her, though. They were simply stating facts.

"Yeah, we know. We meant it in a good way. A healthy appetite's a good thing at your age, no?"

"You need to eat more and gain weight if you're going to grow, so eat all you like."

Frederica fell silent, a sullen expression on her face, then nodded with an oddly keen expression.

"Indeed, I will mature. I cannot stay a child forever, after all."

There was something that bordered on the noble and tragic in her bloodred eyes.

"And so... Waaah?!" She trailed off with a sudden yelp, tossing away a seashell she had picked up. "It moved! It just moved!"

...*Yeah, you're still a kid*, Shin and Raiden both concluded.

As Frederica looked on in disgust, Raiden squatted down to see what she'd dropped.

"Oh, is there something inside?" he asked.

"No..."

Meanwhile, Shin picked up a spiral shell from the sand and examined it quietly. Raiden approached him curiously, then fell silent. A pair of squirming, crusty legs wriggled from within the shell.

"...I think that's a hermit crab..."

"Looking at it move from up close, it's kinda grotesque..."

"Since it's you we're talking about, you probably thought it was your duty as commander to prioritize the mission, Milizé."

Lena was in her temporary office in their base. She'd asked Ishmael to deliver all the latest combat data they could disclose, and she was now examining it. Vika sighed as he gazed at her, his Imperial violet eyes astonished.

"No one would object if you went to the beach for a change of pace. The only reason I didn't go is because I've seen the sea enough times already. It's not particularly unusual to me."

"There is a vast expanse of sea beyond the northernmost borders of the United Kingdom, past the Frost Woe mountain range and the northern peaks," Lerche, who was at Vika's beck and call as always, appended. "In the winter, it's completely covered in ice. It's quite the spectacle."

It seemed Shin and the others had gone to play at the beach, so she was fine staying behind.

"No... I just saw the sea yesterday, and I'll see it during the operation later. But I thought the next time I should go see it by myself should be when the war ends."

Shin had told her he wanted to show her the sea, and she accepted that wish. So...even if she couldn't answer his confessed feelings quite yet, she wanted to at least hang on to that wish.

"We said we would go see the ocean when the war ends. So I want to keep that promise."

As Vika scoffed at her, the smile vanished from her lips as she turned to face him.

"But more importantly, Vika. There's something I need to ask

you.”

She'd asked Ishmael to show her the Fleet Countries' war status following last year's large-scale offensive. And while some of it might be attributed to them lacking exact numbers since it'd been less than a year, the number of casualties didn't match the scale of the battles. Many were left behind and considered missing on the battlefield. The battles were that fierce, and the chaos was that vast.

And there were more eyewitness reports of Tausendfüßler—which were usually considered logistical support units for the Legion. She'd asked Grethe, who confirmed there were no similar cases in the Federacy.

“What's the situation like in the United Kingdom? Could you tell me about the change in the Legion's tactics that she told you about? In detail.”

Though his friends were playing around cheerfully at the edge of his sight, Theo was submerged in his thoughts, his gaze fixed beyond the waves.

The sea.

It was about a year ago that they'd said they'd like to see it someday. Oddly enough, it was also back when they were chasing the Morpho. And while they did want to see it, there was the looming possibility they might lose to the Morpho and die, never to have that wish granted...

So some part of him thought it'd be fine even if it didn't happen. This place was more like a vague objective of sorts. And here they were now, near the ocean. They'd reached it, all too easily. Almost anticlimactically.

Of course, at the time, Theo wasn't thinking of this northern sea. But the ocean was just a symbol for places they'd never seen before. Maybe that was why when he did see the ocean for the first time, there was no feeling of accomplishment. No excitement or intense emotion to speak of.

All he'd felt was an emptiness. Like there was an ever so small yet still gaping hole somewhere in his consciousness. It felt similar to when he'd lost his way and was simply standing still. After all...not a thing about him had changed. Nothing at all.

He'd thought he hadn't advanced any, that nothing had changed ever since he'd left the Eighty-Sixth Sector. And still, here he was, seeing new sights. It all felt so fruitless. Even if he stood still, even if he remained unchanged, even if he didn't know what to aspire to...he would still be caught up in the current of things and carried away to new places.

It was like that in the United Kingdom and the Alliance. Come to think of it, it had been like that ever since they'd been sheltered by the Federacy and brought to Ernst's mansion. The sea before his eyes looked better than it did the previous day; the sun made it seem less black. But the dark blue still struck him as melancholic, and the cold wind and its stench felt somehow scathing and mocking.

Even though this was the first time he'd seen the ocean...it didn't strike him as beautiful in any way. For the first time in a long while, he'd been made aware of it. A sort of perception that had become ingrained in him in the Eighty-Sixth Sector.

This world doesn't need humans.

The world didn't care for one's conveniences, sentiments, or emotions. People could die, and the stars would sparkle in the heavenly sphere just the same. People could barely survive and cling to life, only for heavy showers to rain on their celebrations. The world was so indifferent toward humanity that it almost came across as malicious.

And it felt like he'd been reminded of that fact. Unable to stay where he was, Theo turned around and walked back toward the city.

"I'd always thought cities outside the battlefield were peaceful, but..." Anju muttered to herself with a sigh.

One of the ladies in the cafeteria told her that there was a festival coming up in the port town attached to this base. The Ship Princess Festival, it was called. In the past, each of the Fleet Countries' cities had a ship associated with them, and the figurehead of these ships was said to house a holy spirit called a Ship Princess. Once a year, the cities would hold a festival rite to deify these spirits.

A statue of a maiden stood in front of city hall, decorated with countless flowers, which did give the impression of a festival. Except...the plaza in front of this city hall was in such a state of disrepair, one could mistake it for something straight out of the Eighty-Sixth Sector.

Clouds of dust, damaged buildings, broken pavement, and withered roadside trees. The structures somehow maintained their functions, but the people had long since lost the spare time, energy, and funds to repair them. Children ran about wearing old clothes that, while clean, were riddled with patched-up holes. And despite the festival going on, the stalls were all meager, selling cheap, synthesized confections.

But by contrast, for how small the city was, the citizens filled the

streets energetically, streaming out of prefab residences set up near the square and a nearby park. Those were meant for refugees who had to evacuate as the front line was moved back little by little over the past decade, slowly approaching the home front.

This was the price the Fleet Countries had to pay for fighting on for ten years, despite their diminutive size.

"I guess the Federacy and the United Kingdom were the exceptions... The other countries are all at their limits."

The truth was they'd long since lost the strength to keep fighting, but they still struggled to stay alive, doing battle however they could. And the inevitable end of that would come when they completely exhausted all their strength, only to be trampled beneath the enemy and wiped out.

The reality of that was now laid bare before her.

"But they're still holding the festival," Michihi, who stood next to Anju, muttered quietly.

They decorated the maiden's statue, each flower modest on its own, but the whole array of them was impressive. This was probably the most the townsfolk could gather. They laughed and cheered and beckoned customers and shouted. But just earning their daily bread was taxing. The state of the city vividly displayed just how closely the Legion War had driven them to the very edge of extinction.

And yet they gritted their teeth, forcing themselves to smile and laugh in this ethnic festival. The Eighty-Six were the minority in the Republic, and even among them, the Orienta of the continent's east were even rarer. And Michihi spoke, bearing the appearance of that bloodline.

"I don't know much about festivals. I mean, there was no one to pass them down to us. I don't remember my homeland, and my family is all dead. So seeing this makes me feel lonely. But more than that, I'm jealous. These people have something that's so important to them, they'd do it even if it becomes impossibly difficult to do. And I'm... jealous of that."

Something precious. Something one could be attached to, no matter what. Something that...gave one shape. And the Eighty-Six, whose sole identity was the drive to fight to the bitter end...lacked that precious something.

Theo left the shore and returned to the city, but he didn't find it comfortable in the hustle and bustle of the streets. For such a small town, there was a lot of people, and most of them were of the Jade bloodline, just like him. The Veridian race, which included the Jades, was native to the continent's southern shore. A fraction of them

pursued the leviathans, migrating to this land and founding seven of the eleven Fleet Countries.

But despite all that, nowhere did he find any blood relation nor a friend. He didn't know this festival.

It was likely that some of his comrades were off playing on the beach now because they couldn't feel comfortable around the festival, either. They preferred to be outside the city. Outside the world of humanity. A place governed by something else that wasn't human. Just like the Eighty-Sixth Sector.

There was nothing to inherit there. No roots to associate with. There, they wouldn't have to be bothered by the fact that they had nothing to fall back on. They could live on the battlefield, where they relied on no one but themselves and their comrades.

In other words, they had no foundation to base themselves off of except for themselves. Unlike the people of this city, they had no place of origin anywhere in this world. And this was something Theo thought he'd realized a few times already since leaving the Eighty-Sixth Sector. And still, for whatever reason, it hurt.

They'd learned there was a method for stopping the Legion. Stopping the war was no longer a hopeless endeavor but a realistic possibility. And maybe realizing that was the trigger. But more than anything...seeing Shin, and then Raiden, Rito, and Anju try to strive toward the future was likely the biggest reason.

Theo himself had said, at one point, that Shin ought to try to enjoy life more. That he shouldn't be haunted by the fact that his brother and their many comrades died ahead of him. So Theo was honestly relieved to see him think of the future for once. He knew he had to let go of him now...

...but it left him feeling so terribly lonely at the same time.

Because what was he supposed to do now? He had no foundations to fall back on, no place in the world where he belonged. Shin might have found salvation and become able to reach out to the future, but what was Theo supposed to do? He knew all too well that salvation didn't come easily. After all, how could he gain anything when he didn't even know what "hope" or "the future" meant to him? And if he couldn't gain that, what was he supposed to do?

He didn't know. He was scared.

After shambling around in a daze for some time, as if trying to escape the very shadow that clung to his footsteps, he found himself back at the base. He'd apparently walked into the supercarrier's dock.

The dock was several stories tall and significantly larger in scale than the Juggernauts' hangar. Despite this, the ship's bridge was the same height as the catwalks, which accentuated the size of it. Before him was the sheer magnificence of a massive naval base made for

dispatching aircraft onto the open sea.

On its deck were anti-leviathan patrol planes, made for scouting out the troves of slow and yet countless—as many as the Legion—sea creatures inhabiting the waters. And of course, there were combat fighters meant for dispatching them.

In order to discover and dispatch the leviathans, the ship was also equipped with a sonar system to hunt the largest of leviathan races, the Musukura. These creatures were capable of firing a beam of light, and in order to dispatch them, they would have to be lured out with fighter jets first.

This supercarrier and the planes it ferried were at the forefront of the struggle against the leviathans.

One man, who was standing in front of the ship and looking up at its figurehead, turned around at the sound of Theo's footsteps. Dark-blond hair and green eyes. Indigo-navy uniform and a firebird tattoo.

Ishmael.

"...Hmm. Boy, aren't you from the Strike Package? Your name was, uh..."

A long pause hung between them.

".....Er." Ishmael eventually gave up.

"It's Rikka."

"Oh, pardon. We usually tell one another apart by our tattoos. It's hard to distinguish us with just our faces, you know?"

By the tattoos? Theo eyed him suspiciously. Allegedly, branding themselves with a tattoo was a custom of the Open Sea clans, but the tattoos all looked the same to Theo. Apparently, the tattoo's patterns differed based on one's race or origin. Ishmael had a firebird tattoo, while Esther had one of scales. Orientas had flower tattoos, Topazes had creeping vine patterns, and Celestas had geometric patterns. Jades, Emerōds, and Aventuras had tattoos in the shapes of ripples, lightning, and spirals respectively.

But come to think of it, he hadn't seen another Jade with a firebird tattoo like Ishmael's.

"Shouldn't you be playing in the water with your friends? I heard the Federacy and the Republic can't reach the sea right now."

"I was there before, but...I got bored of it."

"What about the festival in town?"

"...I don't care for it."

For some reason, Ishmael regarded him with a bitter smile.

"You're a Jade, aren't you? Where are you from? Where were your ancestors from before they migrated to the Republic?"

"Huh...? Strictly speaking, I think they came from all over the continent..."

"Ah, a miscalculation on my part. My apologies. What you said

applies to just about anyone. Absolute purebloods only belong in the United Kingdom's and the Empire's nobility. And the Republic, I suppose... Oh, not that I'm bad-mouthing your pretty colonel, the prince, or your operations commander."

Shin's parents were purebloods, but he himself was a mixed child, so he didn't fit in that description, either. But that was beside the point.

"I'm from the south, from some place called Elektra... I think that's from two hundred years ago, though," Theo replied.

"Ah, then we do come from the same roots. My clan was from that area, too. Migrated from there about a thousand years ago or so, though. Still, we can more than make up for that. Welcome home, boy."

His tone was entirely jovial, and despite that, Theo was overcome with an intense sense of denial. This person was only the same color as him. He was a complete stranger otherwise. Theo just happened to have some distant ancestors related to this country. This hadn't been his family's homeland for two hundred years now.

More than anything, the only ones Theo could perhaps call countrymen didn't even share his colors—they just had to have been Eighty-Six who fought on the same battlefield as him.

Just because he shared his colors with someone didn't mean he wanted to be seen as their kin. Especially not when it came from someone who had a homeland and heritage to draw on—along with the fleet commander, who was his father...his family.

Not from someone who had all the things he lacked.

"..."

While Theo remained silent, Ishmael simply gave a nonchalant shrug. That gesture reminded Theo of someone.

"See, that's my thing. I can't help but tease people like that. It's like having a cat hiss at you. It makes me want to mess with ya. That doesn't apply to just you, though. You Eighty-Six have a way of deciding who your friends are and pushing away everyone else who isn't."

He then added, with a carefree smile, that there were a few Eighty-Six who weren't like that. Like his captain and his vice captain, and the brat who said the *Stella Maris* was big and slow... In other words, Shin, Raiden, and Rito.

The ones who used to be like Theo but changed before he knew it. Those words sank into his heart, causing it to freeze over. If anyone was his comrade, it was the Eighty-Six who shared in his pride and way of life. But at this point, even these comrades of his...

“You know, we...we’ve all been drifting apart lately.”

“...Yeah, we have.”

Theo had gone off somewhere at some point. Anju was gone, too, though in her case, she was interested in the festival. Kurena, however, didn’t even want to come watch the ocean with them. Raiden naturally noticed this, as did Shin.

Those who didn’t come to the beach since they didn’t want to see the sea, and those who came here because they couldn’t stand the town’s liveliness. Those who were excited at their first sight of the ocean, and those who decided to go see the unfamiliar festival. They’d all mingled between these different groups, but at some point, a divide had formed between them. Something had changed about the way they viewed one another.

To fight to the very end on that battlefield of certain death. They had no common blood to draw on, no common colors to bind them together. That pride was their sole bond, and it unified them as Eighty-Six... But at some point, they’d begun to split up.

“You shouldn’t worry about it, though.”

One such divided comrade told another, without sparing a glance in his direction. Still, feeling that bloodred gaze turn to him, Raiden kept speaking, his eyes still averted.

“It’s not like you left someone behind or abandoned them or anything, man. They’re just making their own choices, at their own pace. So no matter what choice you make, you don’t have to worry about the rest.”

“...I know,” Shin said.

By the tone of his voice, he really did understand that. But he wasn’t at peace with it, either.

“But if saying that hurts you... I think you guys saved me more than enough times. So if that time comes...”

Raiden couldn’t help but crack a bitter smile.

You idiot. How can you say that? The one who’s been saving us every step of the way always was...

“You don’t have to... You’ve done enough. You’re our Reaper, after all.”

“Yeah, yeah. Here I am, old man.”

Theo’s voice came out sulkier than he’d intended. He forcibly changed the subject, irritated. He wasn’t some kind of scared kitten or something. He could hold a casual conversation.

“What’s the festival all about?” he asked.

“Mm? Oh, the Ship Princess Festival. It’s a Fleet Country tradition. Celebrating the ship gods. I think in this town, it’s a torpedo boat?”

He mentioned some kind of military boat category that'd been rendered obsolete with the advance of technology... But then he stopped quizzically.

"...Or was it something else?" Ishmael then asked.

"Huh...? You don't know?"

"Well, I...I mean, I'm not native to this town."

Theo looked up at Ishmael, who wouldn't meet his eyes.

"Weren't you listening? Guess not. When the Orphan Fleet formed at the start of this war, we evacuated an entire country, turning it into a battlefield to beat the Legion back. We didn't have enough area between the north and south edges of our territory to form a defensive formation, and the Legion invaded us from the east. So we evacuated the most eastern country. That was my homeland. The Cleo Fleet Country."

"...Oh."

He had heard of it. Lena mentioned it before they were dispatched here. It just *hadn't occurred to him*. Not until he heard someone who had lost his homeland say that. It wasn't unlike a certain country that had been forced to discard a good percent of its territory and citizens to form the battlefield of zero casualties called the Eighty-Sixth Sector.

Not unlike the Republic.

Seeing Theo look up at him, frozen in place, Ishmael waved a hand dismissively.

"...You don't have to look at me like that. We weren't treated as badly as you people were. They didn't force us out with guns to our backs, and they didn't confiscate any of our belongings, either. We ran off with everything we could carry, and we weren't really discriminated against when we did settle down somewhere else. The housing they gave us was provisional, though, but the place we evacuated to had it just as rough... Heh, I mean, even the fleet commander had to take the Stella Maris and the whole fleet to evacuate, too," he said jokingly and laughed.

Said fleet commander was... Yes. It was the name of the dead fleet commander. He hadn't seen anyone with the same tattoo as Ishmael, despite the base buzzing with activity as it prepared for the operation. There was the possibility that it wasn't just the fleet commander; everyone else who had that tattoo were already...

So he didn't have those things after all.

He was similar to the Eighty-Six even on that level. To them, who had lost their families, homelands, and were deprived of any culture and tradition to draw on. So maybe... No, he was almost certainly worried for the Eighty-Six, who went through the same plights he did.

"Sorry... And, er..."

Rito's words surfaced in his mind again. Someone was worrying

for them, now that they were outside the Eighty-Sixth Sector. And here he'd met someone else who was in the same position they were... Someone full of pride.

"...thank you."

He'd felt as if he'd just glimpsed a distant speck of light at the end of a long, dark tunnel.

The light of the setting sun reflected off the ocean's surface, the golden glow rising off it like a collection of overlaid mirrors. It was a dizzying, brilliant sight. The captain of an anti-leviathan destroyer, a woman with a peony tattoo, told him that the lighthouse on the city's outskirts offered a good, spherical view of the stars.

It was open to the public as an observatory, and indeed, the horizon looked like an arc from that vantage point. It offered a full view of the radiant spectacle of the sunset's low rays glittering off the water's surface.

The twilit sea shone with a burning, otherworldly golden glow, like a shattered mirror. Somehow, the beauty of it seemed to Yuuto like the very image of rejection. Shiden and Shana were nearby; someone else had apparently told them about this place.

They were in the same unit, but they weren't close enough to speak freely. Especially because Yuuto was stolid by nature. And so they simply stood without exchanging any gazes or words, the warmth of their bodies distant from one another. Watching the same unfamiliar sunset.

"The Open Sea clans came together to form a single navy. It's not so much a military unit as it is a group that's more akin to a 'household' of sorts."

Yuuto turned his gaze in the direction of this new voice. Esther had gone up to the observatory, and for whatever reason, Kurena was with her, too. He'd assumed she couldn't find it in herself to go the beach or the city, and so she stayed behind in the base, where Esther found her and brought her along. Shiden and Shana were probably there under similar circumstances.

It felt like not just Esther and the lady who spoke to Yuuto were bent on sticking their necks into their business. It was the entirety of the Orphan Fleet soldiers and even the people of the town who were keen on showing them around the festival. They all gave them the same impression.

At first, he thought they were being grateful to the foreign unit sent to aid them, or that they were just gleefully hospitable to the first guests they'd gotten from abroad in a decade, but... Now it felt like there was more to it in that that.

The Fleet Countries had existed for a few centuries, while the Open Sea clans had been exploring the seas for thousands of years, competing with the leviathans for control of the waters. Despite losing in that battle time after time, these people never gave up. And it felt like right now, they were somehow calling out—declaring that they had nothing except for this resolute struggle. That this was all they had.

“I guess this is a sympathy of sorts... Toward us, the Eighty-Six.”

Esther continued speaking matter-of-factly.

“So to that end, as Captain Ishmael’s lieutenant, I refer to him as my older brother. Even though there’s no blood relation between us.”

“Er...”

Kurena gazed back at Esther, clearly in awe. All she did was casually ask, in the midst of idle conversation, why she referred to Ishmael as her older brother despite him being younger and not related to her.

“...Sorry. I don’t really get it, ma’am...”

She added the last word, realizing she was speaking to a lieutenant. Thankfully, Esther didn’t seem to mind as she simply eyed Kurena quizzically.

“You don’t? I thought you Eighty-Six had similar relationships.”

Kurena blinked once.

“...You mean us?”

“Yes. For example, you and your operations commander, Captain Nouzen. When I first met you two, I thought you might be siblings. Well, it was obvious you weren’t related by blood, though.”

Putting aside everyone’s facial features being different, the colors they were born with were entirely different. But something about these boys and girls felt similar. The gaze in their eyes, perhaps. It was obvious with a glance that none of them were related by blood, and yet...

“Something about you was visibly similar... Yes, I guess you could call it the shape of your souls. You lived on the same battlefield, destined for the same graves, lived the same sort of lives, and reveled in your pride. It was not by bonds of blood, but bonds of kinship of the soul that formed your connections... Same as how the pride of the Open Sea clans forms our relations.”

These sweet words shook Kurena. She mouthed them feverishly. Like a person who had just been given water at the end of a long trek through an arid wasteland.

“Kinship...of the soul.”

“Indeed. And more so than bonds of blood or camaraderie of the

same country, that is a connection that can never be severed. *No matter what.*"

Esther spoke eagerly within the golden glow, as if stating the obvious.

"And so come what may, he will always be an older brother to me. And in much the same vein, Captain Nouzen will always be an older brother to you. That will never change."



"We only had a rough estimate of the distance and their numbers, since they're so far from us, but knowing this much makes things much easier. Both for us and the diversion fleet."

The briefing room was set in the appropriated university's chapel. Light filtered in through the old, colorful stained glass and down onto the table. There stood Ishmael, examining the documents spread out before him with a smile. Among them was a naval map, where Shin had marked the positions of the advance-recon-unit mother ships.

"Allow me to invite you to lunch when we come back as gratitude for this, Captain. Dried seafood, as is tradition."

"..."

Realizing that he didn't specify fish or shellfish but only vaguely said "seafood," Shin fell silent. Theo spoke in his place.

"Captain, do you mean those dainties the locals like to tease tourists with?"

"No, not at all... It's just that the raw animal itself looks a bit strange, is all."

Lena smiled, seeing that the Eighty-Six were getting along well with Ishmael and the Fleet Country's people. The Orphan Fleet's soldiers and townsfolk were all kind and well-natured. Maybe that was why.

"Ah, look forward to dinner tonight, everyone. It's festival season, and we're grateful to have you here, so the good old ladies running the kitchen were excited about cooking you up a feast."

Ishmael then raised his hand and waved, leaving the briefing room behind. Seeing him off with a smile, Lena then surveyed the room, looking at the Strike Package's squadron commanders and staff officers.

"Now then... Let's get our own briefing started."

The intelligence staff officers, who were smiling just like she was, and Zashya, who looked dumbfounded for some reason, quickly regarded her with serious expressions. The Eighty-Six didn't seem particularly nervous and were settled into their chairs, relaxed. As they usually were. Lena paid this no mind and activated the holo-

window.

“First of all, we have a schematic diagram of our current objective, the Mirage Spire.”

It was a three-dimensional schematic produced by analyzing footage captured by a reconnaissance boat. It had a clear steel framework, but it somehow resembled a living creature's corpse. And despite that, it still had the menacing scale of a marine fortress.

“The height leading up to its top level is estimated to be one hundred twenty meters. It consists of seven towers, with a central one supported by six pillars. Its interior is speculated to be divided into somewhere between ten to twelve floors. The base's control core and the Morpho are located on the top floor. To destroy them, we'll send three detachments of artillery Juggernauts to secure our entry.”

Load capacity meant they could only bring some of their forces. The Stella Maris's load capacity allowed it to ferry one hundred fifty Juggernauts. The supercarrier usually brought a minimal number of patrol helicopters, which were instead moved to a few of the other destroyers. Even with this, the number of Juggernauts it could carry was limited.

The initial plan was that their remaining forces would be sent to the Fleet Countries' front lines, with a few vessels staying behind to be on the safe side, but...

“Second Lieutenants Rito Oriya and Reki Michihi. Your units are to remain on land, where you will be stationed at the back of their front lines to function as a mobile defense force.”

Rito blinked a few times in surprise.

“Michihi and I aren't part of the attack force? And what do you mean, 'mobile defense'?”

“The Orphan Fleet navy's main force will draw the Mirage Spire's attention. When the fighting at the base begins, there's the possibility that the Legion's ground units will launch an attack in retaliation. As such, we need you to stay behind with the residual forces.”

Michihi and Rito exchanged gazes and then nodded, their lips pursed. If that was the case...

“Roger that.”

“We'll take care of it.”

“There's also the possibility that the enemy's composition and formation might change. I'll explain the countermeasures for that later on, so please set aside some time for that.”

Vika glanced in her direction.

“So that's why you requested extra ammunition from the Federacy... You'll be setting Alkonosts on the defensive line as well, yes? With the exception of the scouts I'll be personally directing, I'll leave commanding to Zashya, so feel free to put them to use.”

Due to the weight limitations, the Juggernauts—which had higher all-around combat capabilities—were prioritized over the Alkonosts when it came to attacking the base.

“About the Shepherds we’re after,” Shin then said, “as far as I can hear, there’s two of them. The Morpho, and since we’re assuming this is an arsenal base, the other one must be a Weisel’s command core. They’re a good distance away, so I can only tell how many of them are out there, not how they’re positioned. Once we get closer, I should be able to find out, though. Lerche’s group will serve as scouts, but I’ll be ahead of them, so they shouldn’t get in the way.”

Upon hearing his matter-of-fact explanation, Lena recalled a certain set of instructions and furrowed her brow. They were puzzling and absurd instructions from the western front’s military, which Grethe had delivered to her.

“We’ve been instructed to capture the enemy’s control cores if possible in order to analyze their intentions, but you don’t need to go out of your way to achieve that objective... You can consider it a low priority.”

For a moment, Shin was oddly silent. But before Lena could think anything of it, he nodded as coldly as ever.

“Roger that.”

“Shinei.”

The window in his room at the barracks offered a view of the sea, and since he was going to sleep and get up at set hours to prepare for the operation, the sea was dark whenever he woke up. The time was still deep into the night, too early to be called morning.

From beyond the sleeping city’s silence, he could hear the basso continuo of the sea roar reach his ears. It was a silent whispering, not unlike the constant wailing of the Legion. Not even trying to listen to that sound and the voice beyond it, Shin turned his gaze to the door, where that voice called out to him.

Frederica walked into the room, still rubbing her eyes sleepily.

“What are you watching? Is there anything peculiar out there?”

“Oh... No, I wasn’t looking at anything in particular.”

“So was it the Legion’s...the *Morpho*’s voice?”

Beyond the slumbering city’s silence, beyond the roaring of the waves, was the sound of a ghost...the Mirage Spire’s Shepherd. Frederica walked up to his side with light footsteps, her brooding crimson eyes fixed beyond the sea.

“Shinei.”

Even now, Frederica wouldn’t call Shin by his nickname. Shin could tell, somehow, that this was a sort of self-admonition she’d

enforced on herself. So as to not confuse him with the Imperial knight who resembled him, whom she did call by a nickname—Kiri.

“Shinei. The Morpho in the enemy stronghold...”

She paused for a moment. As if fearing to say the rest.

“Is it Kiriya?”

“...? Didn’t you look?”

Frederica’s Esper ability gave her the power to see the present state of people she knew, even if that person was a ghost. Shin returned her question with a question, thinking she’d know without asking him.

But upon asking, he realized: Maybe she couldn’t bring herself to “look.” She was afraid of the possibility that she might indeed see Kiriya again.

“It’s not your knight,” he said. “His voice and words are different.”

Frederica raised her head at once.

“I think he’s from the Empire, but it’s not your knight... So I don’t know if that’s the information source Ernst mentioned.”

“...”

Frederica then hung her head again sadly. She bit her lip, then looked directly up at him again in plea.

“Shinei, *should that chance come upon us*, you must use me after all. The more time goes by, the more innocent lives are lost. And there’s no telling when that devastation might encroach upon the Federacy. Should that happen, there’s no guarantee you will survive. But me... I am but one small sacrifice, so—”

“No.”

“Shinei!” She grabbed onto him.

Her physique was much smaller than his, of course, so all she could do was shake him slightly. He understood how she felt. Had he been in her position, he’d have likely said the same...and even acted on his words. Same as how he’d thought that acting as bait would have saved his friends two years ago at the end of the Special Reconnaissance mission.

So he thought he’d understood her impatience and resolve. But even still...

“One person might be a small sacrifice... Sacrificing the minority is justified if it’s to save the majority. That’s the logic they used to throw us into the Eighty-Sixth Sector.”

Frederica’s eyes widened slightly. Looking down at her, Shin continued speaking. He knew her impatience and her resolve. But even still, this was one thing he wouldn’t budge on.

“I don’t think sacrificing you is the right thing to do... I don’t want to repeat the mistakes of the Republic.”

CHAPTER 3

INTO THE STORM

Since he was used to a small barracks room and the supercarrier's cramped beds, this room struck him as spacious. Being on land left him restless, even, and unable to fall asleep. As the son of the Open Sea clans' leader—the fleet commander's "child," Ishmael had spent his life aboard the deck of a ship since his youth. Standing on solid ground that didn't waver under his feet felt outright strange to him.

So when his communication terminal's alarm rang before it was even morning, he'd responded to it groggily, half-awake.

"...Yeah," he answered the call with a hoarse voice.

"Brother. My apologies for calling you so early in the morning."

"Esther."

In the Orphan Fleet, the fleet commander was seen as a mother or father to the rest of the fleet. The ship captains saw one another as siblings, and the several thousand crew members saw one another as younger siblings.

In the Open Sea clans, everyone viewed the seniors of the family as parents of sorts, with the newborn children as the collective children of the clan. Each family, each city had its own ship, forming one clan in the Open Sea fleet. That custom had passed down to the Orphan Fleet, forming this peculiar and distinctive way of referring to the officers.

Ishmael came from a different Open Sea clan than Esther, so strictly speaking, they weren't "siblings." But since they'd each lost the clans they belonged to and chosen to organize the patchwork Orphan Fleet, she could still call him her brother.

A captain who had lost his entire clan except for the supercarrier, and a lieutenant who had lost her vessel and the majority of her clan.

Many of the “younger siblings” serving under them had much the same circumstances. The Orphan Fleet consisted of the last survivors of the eleven Open Sea clans, made up of a hodgepodge of birthplaces, clans, and even vessels. They each carried loss and grief, and so they nestled and clung together.

A patchwork, orphaned fleet.

The fleet commander shared his fate with each and every crew member. And perhaps, as a father might, he sacrificed his life to allow his subordinates to escape. That was why the Orphan Fleet didn’t have a fleet commander. The captain of the flagship and supercarrier was seen as the eldest sibling and the fleet commander’s last remaining heir. It was his right to inherit the role of fleet commander.

But that didn’t sit well with Ishmael, for whatever reason.

“The storm approaches. At long last.”

“Yes.”

At long last, indeed.



In the dead of night, the supercarrier *Stella Maris* left its port.

Thankfully, it was a new moon, and with nothing to illuminate the night save the starlight, the darkness was all-encompassing. And so it set sail, hidden within the storm. A covert departure. Radio silence was in place, and the ship’s lights were out.

Despite the darkness, some of the Eighty-Six still rose to the deck to look around. The *Stella Maris*’s crew was all busy, fulfilling their appointed roles now that the ship had left the port. As such, the Processors—who could, if one were to take logic far enough, be seen as baggage being delivered—were left with nothing to do.

They weren’t allowed to bring any lights, and they were warned by the crew to stay away from the side of the ship, as they might fall overboard. A few of the Eighty-Six put distance between them and the deck, looking back at the shore as it grew distant.

A late-night departure, at a time when people would usually be asleep. But as the rocky shoreline faded away, the people of the port town stood gathered there. They didn’t have any lights on them so as to avoid detection. And it wasn’t just adults; children were there, held by the hand or carried in the arms of their parents. They said nothing, simply waving at them.

A covert departure. The *Stella Maris*’s horn did not blare out. But even so, the people gathered, waving their hands as they looked on.

The sight of it left an odd, yet vivid impression.

Since nights were short in high-latitude regions during the summer, the Orphan Fleet's vessels had to depart their respective ports the night prior if they were to approach the target under the cover of darkness.

They weren't heading northwest, toward the Mirage Spire, but rather to a gathering spot in the Flightfeather archipelago, which was directly north of them. It was a collection of small, rocky islands that only the seabirds could live in. They hid among the jagged rocks, which had been eaten away at by the seawater, for a day as they waited for the operation to begin.

Standing at the top floor of the Stella Maris's bridge, which was called the signal bridge, Lena looked around curiously. They were about to begin a day of waiting. They had to remain as silent as possible so as to avoid detection, but she was used to that, so that wasn't a problem.

The supercarrier was built for voyages that could last as long as six months, and so it had a chapel and a library. Ishmael said they were free to make use of them while waiting, as well as look around the signal bridge.

Hearing a pair of legs nimbly climbing the stairs, Lena turned around, only to find Esther peering at her.

"Colonel Milizé, would you like to go down to the deck? You'll be able to see something quite interesting there."

"The deck? No, I..."

She felt uncomfortable refusing Esther's and the other crew's offers, but she'd decided not to see the sea until the war ended. But as she looked down, she suddenly came to a realization as she noticed a dark, blue light. She wanted to see the sea after all. Her curiosity was tugging at her heart.

Forcibly turning away, she lifted her head. After all, they had promised they would see it together once the war ended.

At the crew's beckoning, Anju and Dustin came up to the deck, but after laying eyes on it, they gasped in disbelief. The dark sea shone like starlight, as if reflecting the black sky above.

"Wow..."

"The waves are...glistening..."

The dark velvety waters let out faint, blue specks of illusory light, as if stardust or a flock of fireflies had been scattered over the sea. Especially the silently undulating, crashing waves. Each time the waves broke against the rocks or the ship's broadside, they left behind a faint, blue, glowing trail.

The crew members who brought them over said this was the work

of noctilucas—phosphorescent animalcules. The two of them wordlessly watched the blue, heatless rays of light. There were other figures walking among the flight deck. Apparently, the ship's crew had called over some of the other Processors.

"It's pretty... So pretty, I almost feel bad I can't raise my voice to praise it."

"We are on the battlefield here, after all... I'd love to come and see this again once the war ends."

At those words, Anju stiffened. Dustin didn't know about the information Zelene gave them, of course. He simply said this as part of a groundless, vague wish. A desire for the war to end, so they could live in peace.

"Dustin, will...?"

She still couldn't quite imagine what that would be like. But what about Dustin? Filled with indignation at the Republic's actions, he'd left the Republic to atone for its sins. What would he do if that battlefield were to disappear?

"Will you go back to the Republic once the war ends?"

"...Probably. They need people to help with the reconstruction efforts. Except..."

Anju watched his conflicted face. *If you're against it, I won't go back.* Dustin wasn't sure if he should finish that sentence. And she wasn't sure if pointing out that she realized his uncertainty was the right thing to do, either. She wasn't sure how she'd answer if he'd ask her, but was this something she could poke fun at him over...?

She was standing at Dustin's side. Not as close as she'd stood with Daiya, but...certainly closer than she'd stood next to Dustin at first. And so Anju was overcome by an odd sense of distance—the kind that was awkward, and yet somehow comforting in its own way.

The flight deck, meant for the takeoff and landing of the ship's planes, wasn't set with a railing or a fence. Seated at that sector of the ship, which had nothing to obstruct his field of vision, was Theo. Next to him was Kurena, who was leaning forward like a curious kitten.

"...Well, I guess that's a blue sea in its own way."

"Yeah...!"

The southern sea. Let's go there together when the war ends.

A year ago, the first time they went charging through enemy lines in pursuit of the Morpho, Kurena had said those words. And now her eyes were glittering as she beheld the blue glow on the water.

Like the stardust above them, it was dazzling but didn't really pierce the darkness. It was just an illusory blue radiance. Like bubbles of faint light, barely beneath the undulating waves. The darkness of

the night didn't obscure it, instead making it more conspicuous.

Looking at the water filled Theo with a sense of dread, like something might rise from those dark depths, and the words escaped his lips before he could stop himself.

"We really ended up making it...to the ocean."

"Ended up making it?" Kurena said with a smile. "You make it sound like you didn't want to come."

"Mm... It feels...too soon."

He didn't want to tell Shin, Raiden, or Lena. This was something he could only say because he was speaking to Kurena.

"I thought we'd come see it after everything was settled," Theo continued. "When I figured out what I wanna be...where I wanna go..."

"...There's no rush to figure those things out. Don't force yourself," Kurena said.

Contrary to her words, she hugged her knees like a lonely child.

"We're friends. We're comrades. And that's never gonna change... Lieutenant Esther told me that. So we'll be fine."

No matter what happened, the bond of the Eighty-Six's shared way of life would never break.

"You think?"

Esther, Ishmael...the descendants of the Open Sea clans they met in this land. They were similar to them. They'd lost their homelands and families to the ravages of war but still chose to live their lives with pride.

"...Yeah. Maybe that's right."

He was happy he got to meet them. He was glad he came to this country. He was able to meet people who had lost everything and, when left with naught but their pride, chose to face each new day with a smile. As long as they had solidarity, they would always find a reason to live on.

And if they could do it, then so could the Eighty-Six.

"I think I was a little stressed out about all sorts of things, but... Yeah, you're right. We'll be okay."

Above him was a night sky, lined with stardust. Just like the Eighty-Sixth Sector, with its nights bereft of artificial light. And beneath him was the sea, filled with transient blue fireflies.

Back in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, he'd look up at those stars without a hint of emotion. But now, two years later, they made him feel a bit forlorn. Both the Eighty-Sixth Sector and this vast ocean, detached as it was from land, weren't part of the human world. And oddly enough, that sense of desolation presently weighed on his heart.

He couldn't see a glimpse of Lena's long, silver hair on this vast, three-hundred-meter-long flight deck. He'd considered inviting her, but Vika told him she'd decided not to see the ocean until the war ended. In a way, it was her answer to his own offer to show her the sea.

He wasn't unhappy about that... But he was dying to know her *other* answer.

Just then, he'd caught a glimpse of Ishmael's back near the ship's bow. He was kneeling on the deck, apparently not having noticed Shin. He seemed to be...kissing the flight deck, with the dignity and gratitude of kissing one's aged mother.

"...?"

A small sense of curiosity, akin to doubt, washed over Shin. What was Ishmael doing?

But upon hearing Frederica call his name, Shin turned around and promptly forgot about it.



"9th Mishia Fleet to 8th Arche Fleet. Confirming arrival at operation start line. Commencing attack."

The following day. Two diversion fleets departed their home fleet, sailing in a straight line directly into the Legion territories' shores before changing course. Each fleet drew an arc, making way toward the Mirage Spire base, and were now on the verge of entering the enemy's bombardment range.

"Roger that. Saint Elmo's blessing be upon you."

The Orphan Fleet entered radio silence. Esther silently returned that prayer, knowing it wouldn't reach them.

Outside was their second night at sea, with only a few faint specks of starlight glittering through the curtain of storm clouds. The captain, her "older brother," was presently resting in preparation for the start of the operation. She was currently standing in for him on the integrated bridge.

"A directive to all ships in the Orphan Fleet. Prepare to sally forth. As soon as either diversion fleet enters combat, we set sail for the Mirage Spire."

"Aye, ma'am. What about Brother?"

"He can still rest. He must be in prime condition for when the fleet enters combat so that he can see it through to its conclusion."





The two decoy fleets entered combat, and under the veil of their distraction, the Orphan Fleet sailed in the darkness of the night. In its residential block, Lena had changed in preparation for their arrival in the operation zone within a few hours. She peeked out of her room's entrance, confirming no one else was in the corridor outside her cabin...

...because she had changed out of her normal outfit and into the Cicada.

It was her third time having it on, but that didn't mean she was used to wearing it. And while she'd had a...less formfitting uniform prepared for her after she returned from the United Kingdom, she had forgotten to take it along.

So she was quite unwilling to stand in front of the Stella Maris's crew in this outfit, which outlined every curve and contour of her body. There was a briefing with the captain ahead of her, and Shin was going to be there.

Perhaps she could borrow some work clothes from Anju or Shana...?

With that thought in mind, Lena peered around the empty corridor. Those girls were taller than her, so she could probably wear their clothes over the Cicada. Shiden also fit that description, but something stopped Lena from borrowing clothes from her.

She couldn't put her finger on why, but she felt that asking Shiden wasn't in her best interest.

She poked her head out the door, but upon looking in the other direction, she found Shin standing there. Lena stiffened immediately. Shin was rooted in place with his eyes widened slightly upon seeing Lena wearing nothing but the Cicada.

The purplish-silver quasi-nerve fibers formed a pseudo-brain that coated her body. And since it was skintight, it showed off her curves in a way that left little to the imagination. On top of that, certain parts of her body that had nothing to *support* them jiggled and swayed with her every move.

And Shin was looking right at her.

Come to think of it...Shin did walk in on Anju and Dustin during a mildly intimate moment without them noticing him. His footsteps were eerily silent.

What followed was a long, long, awkward silence.

"I heard Vika supplied you with something called the Cicada back in the United Kingdom," Shin said, breaking that silence.



He had a cold, murderous gaze in his eyes. As if he was holding back a seething, bubbling rage rising within him.

"I did think it was strange I didn't get any information about it... I can see why no one answered when I asked, and Lerche kept apologizing to me when we were in the Revich Base."

Yes, it did make sense. Lena didn't want to wear this thing and didn't feel inclined to explain what it was, either.

"When I asked Marcel, he ran away, saying he didn't want to die yet... Guess I should have taken matters into my own hands and questioned him right then and there."

"Y-your own hands...? Weren't you two together in the special officer academy? You shouldn't torment him..."

"Don't change the subject, Lena. This isn't about Marcel."

Oh. I think Shin might be really angry.

He drew close to her, so close that their noses were almost touching, which startled her and prompted her to lean back. A thought crossed Lena's mind as she frantically sought refuge from reality. It was the first time she'd seen him in such an openly foul mood. It was new, and it made her slightly happy.

"No, er, I wasn't trying to particularly hide it, but...i-it is helpful. But it's just a little... It's...very...embarrassing."

She heaved a single breath, as if letting out some kind of internal pressure. Shin silently turned around.

"Understood. I'll go kill Vika and toss his body overboard."

"Shin...?! Wh-what are you saying?!"

"I left my pistol in the hangar, but I can make do with a sharpened shovel. The priest told me he used those to kill enemy soldiers in his youth."

"What was that priest thinking, telling children about something like that?! No, I mean, why would there be a shovel on a supercarrier?!"

One couldn't even hope to beat a self-propelled mine with a shovel (the explosives that antipersonnel self-propelled mines contained were directional buckshot mines with an effective range of fifty meters), and Shin never learned how to use a shovel in combat since he specialized in fighting the Legion.

Lena couldn't help but quip at him, but it was off the mark in another way.

"Fine, I'll just kick him overboard instead. That should do it. Captain Ishmael said most people who fall into the open sea end up sinking, and it's perfect for concealing corpses anyway—"

"Shin!"

“Mm.” Vika felt a shiver run through his body.

He was in the flight deck control room, which was located on the first floor of the bridge. It had been made into a temporary conference room in preparation for the final briefing.

“That was an odd chill just now...,” he muttered to himself.

“Perhaps you’re seasick, Your Highness?” Lerche asked, tilting her head quizzically.

“If I had to say, it feels like someone’s digging my grave. A rather dark premonition.”

“It’s probably residual guilt from that porn outfit you had me, Anju, and Lena wear in the United Kingdom,” Kurena chimed in.

Vika knitted his well-shaped brows.

“You mean the Cicada.”

“I’m sure it might have been a joke to you, Your Highness, but it wasn’t for us,” Anju appended. “From where we’re standing, it’s pretty much sexual harassment.”

“...I suppose that is one bit of slander I can’t hope to avoid. Fine, I’ll grant you that. Carry on.”

“Owning up to it is nice, but it doesn’t make things better,” Shiden said, glaring at him through narrowed eyes. “Was that suit design your personal kink or something? Gross.”

Ignoring the frown on Vika’s face from the merciless assault, Kurena continued:

“Shin probably found out. Finally.”

“Oh...” Vika shook his head grandiosely, not seeming the slightest bit perturbed. “That’s bad, yes. Who leaked the information?”

He glanced at Marcel, who waved his hands in denial.

“Hey, I wouldn’t blab, would I?!” Marcel exclaimed. “If I said anything, Nouzen would’ve killed me. And then *you* would’ve fed what’s left to the dogs!”

“Well said, Marcel. If you’d have exposed it to him, Nouzen would have indeed killed you. Though personally, I would have raised you from the dead and then flayed the flesh from your bones in a manner most gruesome.”

“...?!”

“Your Highness... That does not come across as a joke when the designer of the Sirins says it. I urge you to refrain...,” Lerche said, looking at Marcel’s pale, horrified face with pity in her eyes.

Watching this master-servant pair perform their usual comedy routine—this time including Marcel—Kurena spoke with the demeanor of a grumpy cat.

“So I’m guessing Shin’s either going to throw you overboard or find an ax to split your skull open, Your Highness. What’re you gonna do?”

“Oh, there’s nothing to worry about. I’m sure a saint like Milizé would defend even a serpent like me. Nouzen would stop if Milizé were to ask him to.”

“...”

Lena probably would do that, and Shin would likely listen to her.

“Your Highness, would you mind if I intentionally misfired in your direction during the next operation?” Kurena asked.

Dying once might do him some good, Kurena thought. Just a little.

Seeing him try to walk away quickly, Lena grabbed one of his arms with both hands and braced herself, somehow successfully stopping him in place. With only the thin filament of the Cicada covering her bare feet, the warship’s metallic floor was chipping away at her toenails. Shin was forced to stop, out of concern for her.

“...Then at least put this on. Go ahead and keep it until you can take this thing off.”

He roughly—almost violently—removed his work top and placed it over her head. As she fixed it so it rested over her shoulders, Lena looked up at Shin, her eyes meeting his bloodred gaze.

“...”

What followed was an odd silence. Not quite awkward, but there was something hesitant about them. Shin was the first to break that pause.

“...It’s a shame the first time we see the ocean has to be on the battlefield.”

Those words gave Lena a start.

I want to show you the sea... I want to see the sea, with you...

One month ago, on the night of the ball, beneath the fireworks. He entrusted her with his wish, and she still hadn’t given him a clear answer.

“Er... Well...”

In other words...it’d been a month, and there was an operation ahead of them. The awkwardness had worn off enough to the point where they could hold a conversation. Shin was implying that it was about time she gave her answer. Noticing this, Lena became self-aware, which made the words become stuck in her throat.

“B-but it was still very pretty! It was the first time I’ve seen anything like it.”

And what she said was extremely, exceedingly, and monumentally inconsequential. He heaved a small sigh. As if to say he expected this. This only made Lena all the more flustered.

“Oh, er... Speaking of, Shin, I heard you got an offer from the Federacy to learn how to control your ability, and you accepted. They

said your mother's family was willing to help. How's that going?"

"...It's just interviews for the time being. They said we need to build up trust first."

"I see... But I hope you learn how to control it soon. I'm sure it'd be easier on you that way. I've been worried about you the whole time, you know."

"..."

"Er, ah... Huh?!"

But while she was stumbling over her words, he suddenly pulled her into an embrace. And as she widened her eyes in shock, their lips locked. Unlike that night one month ago, this time, Shin initiated. A biting sort of kiss. Of yearning, of impulse, of hunger. It was a kiss with a ferocity she wasn't familiar with.

Her heart throbbed with excitement, as if time had rewound, placing her right back in that night. Blood rushed to her head, leaving her confused and dizzy. It was a masculine sort of ferocity, the kind that was utterly foreign to her. It scared her a little. But more than the fear, the heat and sweetness of the kiss left her helplessly intoxicated.

She sought him out desperately, intensely. She felt the warmth of one bloodstream circulating between two bodies. She felt them melting into each other.

How much time had passed? Their lips finally parted, and they naturally exhaled, their breaths mingling. Lena stiffened, red up to her ears. She hadn't expected the surprise kiss, and it left her flustered and unsure of what to do.

"You attacked me out of nowhere last month, and it caught me off guard. So consider this payback."

She met Shin's eyes to see him looking down at her with a sulking, almost childish expression.

"Whenever you're ready to give me your answer...just let me know."



With two scout vessels leading the charge, the Stella Maris's circular formation cut through the tall waves, eventually entering the storm's radius. Ominous dark clouds hung heavily over the sky as heavy rain bombarded the vessels, obscuring their field of vision. Each time the crewmembers blinked, the wind changed directions, whipping the curtain of raindrops in erratic directions as it beat against the ships' armored flight decks.

The waves swirling around the vessel smashed against it in acute angles. The hull creaked as the seawater rattled the ship.

Remaining distance to the Mirage Spire: one hundred forty

kilometers.



The supercarrier's integrated bridge, meant for both steering the ship itself and commanding the entire fleet, was divided into two interconnected levels. One housed the personnel who steered the ship as well as those who commanded and offered support to other ships. The other housed the Strike Package's commander, Lena, and her control personnel.

The integrated bridge was full of people who had been at the helm ever since the battle for the Cleo Fleet Country five years ago, and standing at its farthest position was Ishmael. In anticipation of battle, the bridge's windows were closed up with armor plates. There were countless holo-screens deployed in their place, displaying footage of the outside.

Outside the bridge, wind, rain, and savage waves rampaged about. It was gradually turning from extreme wind to an outright storm zone. The wind was raging at thirty-three meters per second, the highest wind speed possible. A hurricane by definition. It was becoming a swirl of destructive proportions.

Hearing the sound of the compressed air door behind him opening, Ishmael turned to see Lena entering. For some reason, she was wearing the steel-blue men's uniform of the Federacy, which was too large for her. She walked forward with unsteady pauses. She'd likely moved rapidly outside the bridge, battered by a wind stronger than anything she'd experienced before. She was holding her breath. But she came to her senses soon, and her argent eyes soon became racked with tension.

"Captain, it's time for the final briefing," she said.

"Oh, roger that. Esther, I leave command in your ha—"

"Brother." A communications officer with a vine tattoo cut into his words.

He regarded him with a sharp, frigid gaze, his eyes the golden hue of a Topaz.

"It's from the 9th Mishia Fleet."

"...Already?" he asked, his tone a great deal harsher than before. "It's sooner than I thought."

Lena looked up at him. His cold, green eyes didn't turn to meet her gaze.

"...Patch it through."

"Roger that," the communications officer said, operating his console.

The Mishia Fleet's transmission echoed throughout the integrated

bridge. The Federacy had provided them with RAID Devices, yet despite this, the communication was done through radio instead.

“—8th Arche Fleet, we know you’re on your verge of collapse! Answer us!”

Lena’s eyes widened in shock. In order to prevent needless misunderstandings, wireless communication in the military used standardized language. No matter how chaotic the state of battle might be, no one would send a transmission using such casual language. In other words, this wasn’t a transmission directed at the 8th Arche Fleet. It was a transmission aimed at the Orphan Fleet.

A faux transmission, so that even if the Legion were tapping into the airwaves, it wouldn’t disclose the existence of a third possible fleet.

“This is the 9th Mishia Fleet high-speed cruiser, the Astra, transmitting in place of the flagship Europa! The Europa has been sunk by the Morpho’s fire. The fleet only had three remaining high-speed cruisers! You only have two frigates and one high-speed cruiser, correct?!”

A flagship, sunk. And not just that; the diversion fleets were supposed to be composed of seven and eight vessels respectively, and by now, they had both been reduced to less than half their numbers.

Lena couldn’t help but swallow nervously. But she was surprised by how calm and collected Ishmael and the other members of the Open Sea clans on the bridge were. It was then that she realized.

“Due to insufficient forces, we have no choice but to abandon the mission of sweeping up the advance-recon-unit mother ships. We will continue our top-priority objective. The enemy’s remaining ammunition is estimated at sixty-five....make that sixty-four shots. We’ll try to diminish as much of its ammo as possible!”

Their top-priority objective... In other words, buying time to allow the Orphan Fleet to reach the Mirage Spire. No matter how many ships might sink, even if their entire fleet had to be sacrificed to do so, they would draw away the Morpho’s fire.

“May Saint Elmo’s blessing be upon you, 8th Arche Fleet! May we meet under the star of voyage!”

“—This is the 8th Arche Fleet. Roger that. Same on our side as well. May Saint Elmo’s blessing be upon you. Let us meet again under the star of voyage.”

The transmission cut off. Lena looked up at Ishmael, dumbfounded. They did say they were a diversion. They did, but...

“You intended to discard the diversion fleet from the very beginning?”

“...I didn’t want you to hear that, though,” Ishmael said with a sigh, the tattoo of the firebird burning along the edge of his left eye. “This is our problem... The Fleet Countries’ navy’s problem. It’s got nothing to do with your Strike Package. But yes, that’s right. They

were suicide units from the start. We only had practice vessels and damaged crafts set sail, and the crew consisted of old soldiers who were on the verge of retirement. The survival rate of this operation is too low. Our fleet couldn't spare anything or anyone else for this."

And that explained why, despite the navy having been given RAID Devices, those fleets weren't supplied with them...

"If the Fleet Countries are to have any hope of survival, we have to destroy the Morpho. The Stella Maris has to get there, no matter the cost. And if we have to make sacrifices to achieve that end, we will... Once the diversion fleets are sunk, the Orphan Fleet's anti-leviathan ships—our younger brothers—will become decoys."

While Lena was shocked speechless, Ishmael spoke in a composed, matter-of-fact tone, his firebird tattoo fiercely punctuating his resolve. A tattoo that stood for the fleet he belonged to, the ship he manned, and his parents' bloodline. This tattoo was etched all over his body, as was the case for all the Open Sea clans' members.

When one died at sea, the marine life and the ferocity of the ocean current sometimes mangled the corpses' faces beyond recognition. So since time immemorial, those who lived on the sea marked their bodies and clothing with native tattoos and striking patterns so they could be identified—not just at any one spot, but all over their bodies.

But this didn't just stand for one's face being mangled. Fighting the leviathans meant that oftentimes, there was no body left behind. Battles so intense as to leave no remains were too often taken for granted. Ishmael's face gave the impression that he'd accepted that chilling fate.

"...This is war. One way or another, sacrifices will be made. Especially now when we let those scrap monstrosities bring out a long-distance cannon that can easily rip us apart."

One year ago, during the large-scale offensive, the Federacy was bombarded by a large number of cruise missiles in a saturation attack, causing serious damage to the Morpho. They then deployed a ground-effect winged vehicle moving at a hundred kilometers per hour to send a single squadron straight to the enemy's underbelly.

A small country that lacked such expensive cruise missiles and the technological prowess to develop a ground-effect winged vehicle on its own was now under the menace of the same four-hundred-kilometer bombardment. And left with no choice but to launch a charge through the enemy's bombardment range, they were forced to compensate for those deficiencies with the blood of their people.

Denouncing this as a vile, atrocious act would be easy. But...

"...I'm sorry." Lena hung her head.

"What're you apologizing for?" Ishmael smiled and shook his head.

The heavy shower that felt as if the heavens were pouring every drop of water at their disposal washed over the vessel, and the holo-screens showing the view of the ship's exterior were dyed white by the curtain of rain. A rainstorm that invoked an intense pressure. It almost felt like it was maliciously plotting to throttle and crush the ships.

"But well, since you already heard that... You may as well learn something else."

Something about us.

The Orphan Fleet did bring the RAID Devices they had been given. Turning his RAID Device on, he picked up the ship's broadcast microphone. Any announcement spoken into it would reach every corner of the three-hundred-meter ship. The Sensory Resonance's targets were set to all the Orphan Fleet's vessels' captains, vice captains, and communications officers.

"All units. This is the captain of the Stella Maris, Ishmael Ahab."

He got no response. But the crew who formed the lifeblood operating this fleet's ships all tensed up in attention.

"Our fleet is currently positioned one hundred eighty kilometers away from the enemy base. The two diversion fleets are currently engaging the enemy's artillery cannon, but they are unfortunately on the verge of annihilation. It is projected that the Orphan Fleet will need to open hostilities with the enemy sooner than expected."

While trusting them, he first called out to the Eighty-Six, who were neither his subordinates nor part of the Open Sea clans.

"To our allies, the Eighty-Six. Once we reach the Mirage Spire, it will be time to show your worth. The voyage may become much rockier soon, but you needn't have fear. If anything, I advise you to think of this as an attraction and relish the experience. Because I promise you, this supercarrier, the Stella Maris, shall not sink."

He'd said those words time and again. As the captain of the flagship and de facto commander of the fleet, his mission was to deliver them to their destination. Despite being a defender of his country, he needed to rely on the strength of a foreign country. And of child soldiers, at that. Of course, the Federacy didn't deploy them here out of the kindness of their heart. Even still, these children were caught up in the Fleet Countries' failings.

And so he swore he would return them home alive, no matter the cost. He would deliver them safely back to land. Even if it would mean exposing himself and the Stella Maris to terrible shame and disgrace...

"All crew members. Last survivors of the eleven Open Sea clans, my younger sisters and brothers. Allow me to first express my gratitude as your sibling for your loyal service thus far. Thank you. And let me express my deepest respects for your choice to die in your

homeland's name, for setting sail on this voyage with me.”

In order to enable the *Stella Maris* alone to reach the enemy's base, the eleven ships of the Orphan Fleet's navy would act as bait. They had some rescue boats following them, but the sea was stormy, and they were in the presence of a 300 mm cannon capable of toppling entire fortresses. There was no guarantee they'd be able to rescue anyone. And this far out at sea, corpses rarely ever washed up on the port.

And yet fighting to the death in the unexplored expanses of the ocean was the pride of the Open Sea clans.

“Our final enemies will not be the leviathans, but those damnable metal monsters. However, our deaths will be honorable all the same. Let us make this a voyage that will make the late fleet commander weep with envy. One that will be lauded by future generations. Let us go out in a blaze of glory and determination that will be remembered for millennia... This will be...”

One thousand years down the line, their progeny would sing their stories. Long after the *Stella Maris* and the Orphan Fleet's visage and courage had faded away, their memories would persist.

“...the final open-sea voyage of the Orphan Fleet that our Fleet Countries *once had*.”

Lena gasped in shock. Before her eyes, Ishmael thrust his fist into the air, and the Fleet Countries' navy officers around him did the same. Lena watched them in disbelief. “Final voyage”? The fleet they “once had”? That sounded as if...as if admitting this Orphan Fleet, the last remaining military force they still had, was going to be lost forever in this operation...!

Vika spoke from the other side of the Resonance. He waited on the bridge's first-floor flight deck control room, which had been converted to a temporary meeting room since the ship's planes weren't planned to be utilized in this operation.

“Aircraft carriers...”

The marine aircraft platform that was the basis of this supercarrier...

“...have the highest firepower projection of all battleships. But on its own, an aircraft carrier is actually extremely fragile. It needs a convoy to remain vigilant around it, complete with destroyers and cruisers to handle air defense. Only then can an aircraft carrier focus on maintaining aerial superiority in combat. Without a convoy, it would be sunk easily. That's probably the same for a supercarrier.”

Even if the supercarrier were to survive this, without its consort

ships, the Orphan Fleet would be done for. The war had dwindled their numbers. And with the Fleet Countries' meager financial and national power, they wouldn't be able to build any more expensive long-voyage or anti-leviathan vessels.

Without the Orphan Fleet, the Regicide Fleet Countries would lose their symbol and honor—the ability to sail into the open sea. They really did discard everything, even their pride, in order to allow their country to survive. A powerless atrocity for such a small country.

And as if not feeling the slightest bit bothered by it, Ishmael spoke. Like an older brother taking his siblings on a hiking trip they'd been looking forward to.

Like the Spearhead squadron once did, as they vanished into the Legion's territories on their last reconnaissance mission.

"I shall ascertain your battles and deaths with my own eyes. I and the Stella Maris shall be your storytellers. Even in one hundred years' time, when I am old and decrepit, I will speak of your bravery with my dying breath. And even a thousand years later, the Stella Maris shall remain as a monument to the existence of our fleet, our country, and the Open Sea clans. And so, my crew, go forth and perform the flashiest, most impressive, proudest...death you can muster."

"...So that was a farewell."

In the adjacent briefing room, with a command table set up at its center to survey the ship's aircraft, Shin whispered those words with a heavy heart. The townsfolk had stood at the port despite the fleet departing in the middle of the night. They waved at the ship, paying it one final farewell.

They...and perhaps all the Fleet Countries' citizens knew. This operation would be their remaining fleet's last voyage. The pride of the open-sea voyages was the national symbol and motto of the Fleet Countries, and today, it would be lost forever.

The Orphan Fleet was currently in a state of radio silence, but the captain, vice captains, and intelligence officers used the RAID Devices provided to them by the Federacy to transmit messages instantaneously through Sensory Resonance. Captain Ishmael's words reached the surrounding three long-distance cruisers, the six smaller anti-leviathan vessels, and the two scout vessels.

From beyond the curtain of the dark night and the stormy rain, the silhouette of the bridge on the front portside section of the long-distance cruiser Benetnasch was visibly moving. With only the soft glow of its gauges as a source of light, Kurena could see the captain and the vice captain giving each other a high five from the fifth floor of the Stella Maris's bridge's—the flag bridge.

Some part of her mind vaguely wondered why. Why? They were letting go of their pride. The last fragments of what gave them form. The people who said they were just like them. So why were they laughing like this? They said their bonds with their comrades would never change.

Did Esther say that because she meant that even if all else was lost, one's comrades remained?

"That's so..."

All Navigatoria-class supercarriers, including the *Stella Maris*, had airtight enclosed ship bows. Both the hangar and the adjacent standby room were safe from the rain and the wind, but their sounds still echoed just the same, albeit slightly muffled.

It sounded less like raindrops pattering and more like pebbles pelting the deck. The wind howled in high and low screeches, like a thousand flutes being blown at once, or the war cries of some ancient savage tribe. The air was warm and insulated, but it was disturbed by sudden flashes of blinding lightning and the loud rumbling of thunder.

The sound of primal brutality that had been etched into the human psyche as a symbol of unconditional fear. The raging of the heavens. The booming reverberations that people had for many generations believed to be the roaring of angry gods and monsters.

The Processors, who had finished their preparations and waited in the standby room, looked up to the sky with their breaths held. They'd all experienced a storm before, but they were now in the heart of the sea, with nothing to impede the raging rainstorm.

And between that and what they'd heard in the ship's transmission, the anxieties and doubts they would have usually pushed to the bottom of their hearts were rising to the surface.

The pride to fight to the bitter end... The Eighty-Six were those who took to the battlefield while seeking nothing else. So in their eyes, the Fleet Countries' resolve to fight on even after throwing that away was hard to believe. How could they continue to battle after discarding even the pride that defined them?

How could they...live on?

This wasn't something they could hope to imitate. Everything else had been taken from them, so if their pride was the next to go, they would have nothing left to give them shape. Even if it was all they had left...their pride could not be taken away so easily...

As they weren't used to sea voyages, the lurching sensation of the ship rocking beneath their feet kept them alert. A stormy ocean. The force of the waves lifted the vessel and then dropped it back down, shaking it up incessantly. They were used to the intense mobility of

the Juggernauts, so the rocking didn't make them seasick. But the realization that a single layer of iron plating was all that separated them from a vast, boundless abyss did leave them shaken in another way.

That realization instilled a great deal of anxiety in them. There was no true, everlasting support for them anywhere in sight. The footing they were standing on was, in fact, unreliable and fragile.

This was something they'd thought they knew before. In the Eighty-Sixth Sector's battlefield, in the snowy fortress, and now in this vast blue sea.

They'd realized this so many times already—that pride was such an uncertain, brittle thing to cling to. Nothing was truly unbreakable. There was nothing in the world...one could be sure they'd never lose.

As experienced and seasoned as they were, that fear took away their words. Like terrified children, they all looked up at the storming sky with their breaths held as it screeched out its mad, tempestuous howls.

Putting the microphone away, Captain Ishmael took a deep breath and settled into his seat.

"Esther, I relinquish command to you for the duration of the briefing... I'm sorry I kept you waiting, Colonel Milizé."

"Understood, Brother."

"No... Um, Captain Ishmael."

He turned around, only to find Lena with tears in her eyes. Ishmael regarded her with a bothered smile.

"I told you, you don't have to look at me like that... So long as you think back on our country every now and then, we'll be satisfied."

This wasn't something to discuss on the integrated bridge. There were people waiting for the briefing, and so they went out to the corridor, where they continued the conversation.

"We were always a small country without any large industries to speak of, and we supported this large, exaggerated fleet with money we didn't have. The longer the war lasted, the harder it became to live. It was only a matter of time before we wouldn't be able to keep it up anymore."

They went down the battleship's cramped staircase, reaching the first floor of the bridge. As they did, passing crewmembers cleared a way for them with a salute.

"Today just happens to be that day. It might be the end, but we will do what we set out to do, so it's a fine way to go."

"It's not fine at all."

Just as they were about to open the door to the flight deck control

room, they heard a voice behind them. Ishmael turned around with a raised eyebrow, finding a young man in the peak of his adolescence standing at the top of the stairs. He was wearing a steel-blue uniform that didn't seem to fit his growing physique, and he was breathing heavily.

Theo.

"Second Lieutenant Rikka."

Lena parted her lips to scold him, but Ishmael faced him directly. He told her to go ahead, pushing her small back toward the room almost forcibly and closing the door behind her.

Theo then spoke, as if paying no mind to Ishmael's implicit act of consideration.

"They took away your homeland, and you lost your real family, right? And now you're throwing away your pride, too... How can you accept that?!"

If nothing else, Theo wouldn't be able to do that. There were likely few Eighty-Six who could. They had no homeland to return to, no family to protect, no culture to inherit. So letting someone take away their pride—the will of their comrades, living and dead—scared them more than anything.

So how could Ishmael and the other crew members, who had their homes and families taken away by the war, see it come to claim their pride next...and simply accept it? And *with a smile*, at that.

"...Well, you see."

Ishmael nodded, as if accepting Theo's desperate shout head-on. He pondered something for a moment, then parted his lips to speak.

"You see, 'Nicole'...the leviathan skeleton you saw. She was originally up for display in my hometown's governor's palace."

Theo eyed him suspiciously, as if unsure what he was talking about all of a sudden. Nicole. The leviathan skeleton up on display in the base's hall.

"When the war began and we had to abandon our territory, the fleet commander loaded all the refugees he could onto the ships and, somehow, found a place for her before leaving the fort. He knew the war probably wasn't going to end anytime soon. That we wouldn't go back there for a long while. So he brought Nicole along... He thought that by taking her as a symbol of our homeland, she would help support our spirits."

The fleet commander knew, even back then, that the Cleo Fleet Country's navy likely wouldn't remain to serve as a symbol of the country. Neither would the Stella Maris, or the descendants of the Open Sea clans who served as the fleet's crew.

And sadly enough, his assumption proved true. The Legion War raged for ten years, and the fleet commander sunk to the bottom of

the sea with the Cleo Country's vessels. The Stella Maris's crew went to fight on land to close a hole in the defensive formation during last year's large-scale offensive. Forced to battle in an environment they weren't used to, they died there.

By now, the only remnants of the Cleo Fleet Country were Nicole, the Stella Maris, and Ishmael himself. And as proof that their country once existed, Ishmael and the Stella Maris would end their service in this operation. However, in spite of the pain...

"The hall that Nicole's in right now was never meant for her. Originally, the last keel of the torpedo boat passed down in this town was on display there."

...there were people who honored their sacrifice.

"For our sake, for the sake of all the people who lost their homes across the Fleet Countries, they spared us a place to keep our pride safe. That city is our hometown, too. Right now, at present, that city is my hometown. See, you can always find something new. Even if you lose everything. For as long as you live, you can always find something that's just as precious. Even if that place is a lie, it can become real."

Contrary to his words, Ishmael regarded Theo with a fickle, fading smile. So faint that it felt like it could easily melt away and disappear in the boundless waters of the ocean.

"The Fleet Countries' history is one of defeat. And I'm not only talking about our age-old struggle against the leviathans. We have two major powers as our neighbors, who always looked down on us, made light of us, and snatched all our proper territory. We had to toady up to them to retain what land we did have and maintain the fleet, so we could survive... We lived through centuries of defeats and countless acts of pillaging. But even when we lost, even when we were robbed and left to go without, we had to live on. The people of the Fleet Countries realized this... So that's how I know. We *can* just find something new to aspire to."

"But what if dying doesn't earn you anything in the end?"

Theo shook his head in denial like a child throwing a tantrum. His voice had risen to a shout, but he didn't stop himself.

"You kept losing things, being denied and stolen from... And then you died, practically for nothing... What's the point of dying without regaining what you've lost?!"

It was just like with his old captain. He'd cast aside his future, his family, and then died in battle. His homeland mocked him, calling him a fool. His son had to live in doubt of the validity and dignity of his death... And at the last moment, his final words were a plea to never be forgiven.

He'd fought in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, same as Theo, but never

found a single friend or ally until the very end. The captain was always alone.

“Why did you persist...on that kind of battlefield?”

“Well...” Ishmael smiled. “So long as I don’t bring shame to myself, I’m satisfied. That’s all I need.”

He had the same expression as the captain did. Jovial to the point of stupidity. Strong to the point of foolishness.

“If I don’t, I’d never be able to look the fleet commander in the eye. He might be dead, but he lost his life defending my clan... So if I live my life with my head hung in shame, he will have died for naught.”



“Brother, I return command rights to you... We lost contact with both diversion fleets fifteen minutes ago. Their last transmission was ‘forty-five shots remaining. May fortune be on your side.’”

“Roger that... Now it’s our turn.”

The enemy’s remaining ammunition: forty-five shots. Remaining distance: one hundred forty kilometers.



In order to share the situation for as long as possible with their operations commander, the unit’s operations commander and his deputy—Shin and Raiden—as well as Yuuto and his lieutenant remained on standby at the flag bridge on the fifth floor.

The rain was still beating mercilessly against the thick anti-blast glass windowpane, the water splashes making it impossible to see through the window. The room was dark, its lights off so as to avoid detection by the enemy.

The window itself then lit up as a bright bolt of lightning streaked across the sky, momentarily painting the horizon white. Not a few seconds later, they heard the intense rumbling of thunder nearby, so thick and heavy it sounded like the crumbling of an iceberg. Purple lightning danced through the gap between the clouds, flashing across the leaden skies and sea that were otherwise indiscernible under the tyrannical curtain of the storm.

For many ages, people had likened lightning to a dragon, owing to its fluid, almost organic streak’s similarity to the flight of a mythical creature. It was like a fissure running through the dark, cloudy air above them.

“...Hey.”

Unable to discern if he was really calling out to another or simply uttering the word, Shin only realized which it was when he turned his gaze in the direction of Raiden's dazed voice. Even with the lightning gone, it was still bright outside. There was no moon—to say nothing of a sun—to dispel the darkness. Something like starlight, like the brightness of snow, like the pale-blue glow of the noctilucas. A faint glow that had melted into the darkness.

Shin knew that even if the lightning were to hit the ship directly, it wouldn't tear through the windowpane. Even still, he approached the window with instinctive caution. Looking outside, he felt his breath catch in his throat.

The source of the light was the Stella Maris itself.

At the edge of the hull, just below the flight deck, the two 40 cm gun mounts and their muzzles were alight. The bridge itself as well. Despite the darkness blotting out the ship's bow, the electrocution forced them to light up. A blue, heatless light, like a will-o'-the-wisp.

This mystifying light gave the ship the illusory appearance of a ghost ship, sailing the sea forevermore with its sails torn and its mast broken.

Perhaps the whole world was a sort of illusion. Human history, its pride. The very fact that people ever lived. The value of humanity, all the things they cherished and held up as dear, were all but a meaningless illusion.

Shin clenched his fist tightly. The emptiness that crossed his mind stopped that train of thought in its tracks.

...That isn't true.

That can't be true.

The door to the room swung open wildly, and a crew member peeked inside.

"Lads! We're almost to the Mirage Spire's region! Get ready!"

"Roger."

Shin was the first to leave, with Raiden and the others hurrying after him. Another loud roar of thunder echoed in their wake, as if seeing them off.

Lena saw it from her spot on the integrated bridge.

"That's..."

A blue light, as if left behind by the lightning that struck down from the heavens. Like a heatless flame flickering. She had to wonder if this was some unusual phenomenon, but Ishmael and the crew were too occupied with steering the ship across the storm to pay it any mind.

A constant siren wailed, and alert lights lit up. Shouted

instructions flew across the bridge. With the two diversion fleets wiped out, they would have to charge in, despite them failing to eliminate the advance-recon-unit mother ships. The Orphan Fleet intentionally chose to cross a region where the waves were exceptionally rough—a region the Clans usually chose to avoid.

The advance-recon-unit mother ships were originally reappropriated merchant and fishing ships taken from some other, fallen country. They weren't built to sail through such rough seas and, as such, couldn't brave this part of the ocean. And since this region was only a short distance away from the leviathans' territory, the Rabe couldn't fly in the high altitudes above this region for fear of being shut down.

The risk of them being detected here was low. But it was only a matter of time until they'd leave the cover of this region.

Remaining distance: one hundred ten kilometers.

On the outer circumference of the fleet's formation, the six anti-leviathan vessels turned rudder, increasing the size of the circle. The two scout ships leading the formation widened the width of their line to increase the range of their detection. They deployed sonobuoys. Opting not to use their antiair radar, as it would make them easier for the enemy to detect, they braced for the advance-recon-unit mother ships' approach.

Shin, who had moved into the hangar, reported that there were Legion approaching in low altitude—the recon units had deployed.

A transmission through the Para-RAID arrived from the anti-leviathan vessel on the furthest side of outer circumference—the Hokurakushimon.

“Brother. Everyone aboard the Stella Maris. It is time we depart. May you live long, healthy lives.”

The captain of the Hokurakushimon was a woman. A relatively young woman, at that. Leaving behind her two children and husband—who wasn't born into an Open Sea clan—behind on land, she regarded the future ahead of her with a smile.

“And may fortune shine upon you, Eighty-Six. Come spend some time here in the future, when peace is upon us.”

The Hokurakushimon changed course. It turned its starboard side away from the fleet heading east, instead sailing south. The ship's contours vanished behind the waves, and once it had gained enough distance from the fleet, it turned on its antiair radar, breaking the radio silence.

The air became flooded with upbeat music. Apparently, the whole crew beneath the captain began singing as they moved. A song of adventurous sailors, sailing south into the azure seas. A song of an unachievable dream.

Both the radar and the radio transmission released electromagnetic waves in all directions. They had maintained radio silence for fear of having their position traced, discovered by the Legion. And they willingly lifted that radio silence.

Before long, beyond the great barrier of the waves, with the contours of the ship's hull all but gone from sight, the sound of multiple-rocket launchers unleashing their payload filled the air, their firing lines filling the skies with smoke and flame.



A recon unit detected the newly approaching vessel's radar waves. At the top of the naval base the Fleet Countries called the Mirage Spire, the Morpho received this report and swerved its massive 800 mm cannon.

<<Colare One, acknowledged. Opening fi—>>

As it fixed its sights on the enemy vessel's—or perhaps enemy fleet's—estimated position, it noticed it. Being the Legion unit that boasted the highest firepower and range, the Morpho had its own antiair radar. And this radar system was now...

<<Canceling main turret's firing sequence. Switching to antiair defenses.>>

...detecting multiple flying objects.

Eight antiair revolving autocannons moved in tandem. Fixing their sights on the flying objects and opening fire, they shot down the majority of the rocket shells.

<<Interception of target deemed impossible.>>

A single rocket slipped through the Morpho's fire. The canister shot triggered in close range, dropping the bombs it contained like rain over the Morpho. The Fleet Countries' rocket cannons had incredibly low accuracy, and so they compensated for it by employing multi-rocket launchers and firing volleys through several cannons at once.

The explosion-reactive armor triggered, blocking the missiles from penetrating, but if the same spot were to be hit a second time, the Morpho wouldn't get away unscathed.

The enemy would have to be promptly removed.

<<Colare One to advance-recon-unit mother ships. Move to designated coordinates.>>

By reverse-calculating the missiles' trajectories, it deciphered the

location of the vessel carrying the multitarget rocket launcher that fired at it. The main turret cut through the wind as it turned in its direction, locking onto its target.

<<Requesting ballistic measurement. Opening fire.>>



“—Communications with the Hokurakushimon and the Albireo, lost. Estimate is that they’ve been sunk.”

While the anti-leviathan ships drew out the enemy’s fire, the Orphan Fleet’s main force continued speeding toward its target. Seeing its sister ships complete their duties by throwing themselves literally into the line of fire, transmissions came in this time from two other anti-leviathan ships that had been on the Stella Maris’s starboard side.

“The Altair and the Mira here. We’re setting off.”

“We’re going ahead, Stella Maris!”

After that, once again, they got another transmission. This time from the two scout ships, which broke away from the main fleet. By now, only the Stella Maris, three long-distance cruisers, and two anti-leviathan ships remained. The remaining distance was forty kilometers.

They avoided the massive waves that rose up like ramparts impeding their way, but as their field of vision cleared, they were met with a wall of white mist. Dawn was just breaking, but in this region of the ocean, morning mist was an uncommon occurrence. As they approached the mist, they realized it wafted up endlessly—water vapor resulting from the rising water temperature.

The Mirage Spire stood isolated in the middle of the sea, and this was probably its power source. The source of the heat was the underwater volcano. The vapor was created from its heat leaking out into the ocean. The cold northern wind then chilled the water in turn, resulting in white vapor, which whirled up into the air.

The Stella Maris’s bow pierced the white veil as it approached its target. When it broke through the curtain of fog, the ship was a mere thirty kilometers away from the base—within the firing range of the ships’ guns.

“All long-distance cruisers and anti-leviathan ships, align your sights. Shoot it down from here if you must. Fire!”

The five remaining ships opened fire. Every gun and rocket cannon spewed flame, intending to force the Morpho to pull back, as well as draw its attention away from the Stella Maris. The guns rumbled, as if roaring out in indignation at this one-sided assault and

in grief of their fallen comrades on the sunken diversion fleets and ships.

Before long, the gun smoke rose, coiling up throughout the region regardless of the raging winds.

And then, blitzing through the ashen mist of gunfire, there came a thunderclap. An 800 mm shell crashed down diagonally, accompanied by massive shock waves. The anti-leviathan vessel Tycho, which filled a scout ship's spot at the head of the formation, was hit by the shell.

The shell penetrated its top deck, several levels of its service deck, and its residential block, reaching as deep as the heart of the ship before piercing the engine, where the thicker armor plating at the bottom of the ship finally stopped its advance. Finally, the shell triggered and exploded.

The massive kinetic energy resulting from the missile's ramming and the blast of the explosives split the Tycho in two. The ship's bow and stern tilted skyward, as if letting out a final dying scream, only to be knocked down into the water by a side wave. The billowing wave engulfed the rest of the ship, and the sea swallowed it.

On the other side of the pitch-black waters, beyond the veil of fog and the curtain of wind and rain, and at the very tip of the heavens was a gray form, blending into the leaden skies. They could finally see it.

“Target sighted! It's time, lads! Get ready!”

An officer burst into the hangar, finally barking that order at them. The deck crew operated an elevator, moving the first group that would invade the enemy base into the flight deck. A force of six units, their legs folded, climbed up at once.

Among them was Undertaker, and sitting within it, Shin looked up. The intense roaring of the wind and the incessant howling of the Shepherds in his ears. The voice of the Morpho's Shepherd alone was a cacophony, letting out battle cries loud enough to sound like an entire army as it repeatedly fired at its targets.

Since it was a deck for launching aircraft and not people, the elevator lacked walls or a ceiling that would block the wind. As they left the hangar, an intense, sidelong wind filled with raindrops began blowing on the Juggernauts. While the elevator rose one level after another on the way up, the wind grew stronger. There were no objects or masses on the sea to stop the wind. The wind blew so hard that Shin couldn't shake the fear that even a Reginleif, with its weight exceeding ten tonnes, might be blown away.

If the lightweight Reginleifs were to try to carelessly stand tall on the windswept flight deck, they ran the risk of being overturned. Shin carefully undid the lock on his unit's legs, effectively prowling in a

crawl as he stepped off the elevator and onto the battleship's bow, crossing the runway that spanned the ship's hull in the direction it was sailing in. Having reached the end of the highway, he crouched in front of the ship's bow and remained on standby.

A flash of lightning lit up the clouds as the rain battered down upon them, the light reflecting off the raindrops and momentarily filling Shin's field of vision with white. The gloom and the rumbling of thunder filled him with a sense of dread and suffocation, as if he'd sunk into the cold depths of the dark sea stretching before his eyes. The black clouds brewing in the sky above were the water's surface, and the rain-battered flight deck was the ocean floor.

Storm clouds blanketed the sky and cast the world into darkness. Countless droplets of water lashed against the deck, creating an incessant, rattling din. The sheer volume of water felt as if the sky had fallen on them, exposing them to a suffocating, awe-inspiring pressure.

Indeed, had he left the Juggernaut and exposed his body to the elements, he likely wouldn't have been able to breathe. The wind and water beating against the one layer of armor covering him were that intense.

And far ahead, a tower of steel lorded above him, its peak hazy in the distance. Even with the backdrop of the stormy sky covered in dark clouds, the shadow was still noticeably black as it raised its body.

This was likely some defense set up to guard the enemy gun. A large canopy, as hard as a shell, had been placed above it, held up by metal pylons bent into the shape of talons. It crept out from outside the canopy, its blue optical sensor lit up like a will-o'-the-wisp. Its barrel, shaped like a pair of spears, had faint tendrils of electricity dancing around it.



It was gazing back at them. Coldly. Haughtily.

With a loud thud, its two glowing, silver wings stretched out to the heavens.

The Morpho.

“Remaining distance: five kilometers. Remaining estimated ammunition: one shot!”

“Bring it, you big metal bastard!”

The artillery battle was ongoing. The last remaining anti-leviathan vessel blitzed through the final five thousand meters, while the three long-distance cruisers were still intact as well. One of the cruisers, the Basilicus, sped toward the Mirage Spire, breaking away from the rest of the ships, its two 40 cm cannons alight in rapid fire.

As it fired, its search lights were lit up, and its radar and radio were both transmitting in full force, its crew barking commands to keep shooting so as to attract the enemy sights to itself. And just as it wanted, the Morpho’s muzzle turned in the direction of its reckless charge.

The top of the pylon gleamed as the Morpho unleashed an arc discharge that flashed like lightning. The Morpho’s railgun boasted an initial velocity of eight thousand meters per second; as soon as the muzzle roared, the shell had already impacted its target. But despite that, the Basilicus surprisingly avoided its exceedingly quick line of fire by turning portside hard. Throughout this battle, they’d observed the particularities of the way the ghost inhabiting the Morpho tended to aim, allowing them to pull off this astounding evasive maneuver.

The Morpho’s last remaining 800 mm shell gouged into the waves, forming a concentric tidal wave that passed over not only the Basilicus, but the lines of fire of the other long-distance cruisers, the Benetnasch and the Denebola. Their shots, launched in case the Morpho still had ammunition left, created explosions and shock waves that blinded the Morpho’s sensors and forced it to momentarily retreat under the canopy.

Beneath the tower, the Stella Maris continued to hurdle toward it at maximum combat speed. The Mirage Spire was approaching. By now, it was so close that their field of vision couldn’t grasp its full size, its sheer majesty visible from the integrated bridge. Pillars of concrete extended perpendicularly from below the water, each one as wide as several buildings stacked together. Six such pillars formed a hexagonal shape, and on top of it was a six-pointed, prism-shaped fortress that towered into the sky.

Half-transparent solar panels coated the outer circumference of the structure like scales, now dyed white with the raindrops. The

structure's interior wasn't visible through them. Its full length stood a hundred twenty meters tall. Its shape was like the roost of some mythical dragon living in the sea. It stacked on and on; the mere thought of climbing up it felt like an endless nightmare.

The Stella Maris approached the foundation of the fortress, one of the six concrete pillars. The helmsman was probably incredibly fearless, since he didn't slow down, nearly ramming into the pillar with the ship's broadside. And yet he did this with extreme precision. The metal didn't so much as screech as the ship stopped alongside the towering concrete palisade.

Shin and his group watched from the flight deck. It looked essentially like an act of suicide. As the ship sped toward the concrete cliff, they all held their breaths, their eyes wide as they braced for impact. But right in front of the collision, the supercarrier suddenly turned its rudder, the broadside's bow stopping alongside the fortress.

From this position, the pillar's base was in the enemy's way, meaning the strike force could climb up without being exposed to enemy fire.

The operation had commenced.

Shin's thoughts shifted, like a switch had been flipped in his brain. He had almost unconsciously brought Undertaker, which sat crouched as if beaten down by the rain, to a standing position. His consciousness, which had been honed and optimized for battle, had drowned out any concept of fear or pressure from the dangers of nature.

Lena's order reached his ears.

"Artillery unit, open fire! Spearhead squadron, advance!"

CHAPTER 4

THE TOWER (UPRIGHT)

As a battleship, there was a height difference of nearly twenty meters between the flight deck and the water's surface. The bottom of the enemy base, which was supported by the pillars, was directly above them. The base itself was made of steel beams forming a grid, like a metallic spider's web.

One could sum it up as a steel frame, but it extended well over a hundred meters into the air, forming a gigantic fortress. Each beam was the breadth of a Juggernaut, and the gaps in the grid were wide enough that not just a Juggernaut but even a Löwe could easily fit through them.

The interception unit remained on the bottom floor of the fortress to mow down the artillery, while the Spearhead squadron acted as vanguard and invaded farther in. They fired their wire anchors, tangling them around the beams. They then jumped, releasing and retrieving the wire anchors as they landed.

The Mirage Spire base's interior consisted of multiple floors. For the sake of convenience, every set of three floors was designated as a Level. There were Levels A (Agate) to E (Erze). Standing on Level Agate One, the bottom floor, Shin looked up at the base, examining its interior. It was massive from the outside, but upon coming inside, the absurd size of the place was even clearer. A whole base...a whole munitions factory could fit on every individual floor.

Three beams connected to form an equilateral triangle, and a countless number of such triangles formed the grid that served as the bottom for each floor. Looking down from above, the whole base looked like a hexagon propped up by the pillars. The concrete pillars that supported it were six in number and as thick as the one they'd

seen. They extended all the way up to the peak, across the naked metal scaffolding.

The vertical construction materials and truss structure were put together to form transparent pillars set in a geometric shape. The outer walls of the fortress were made of half-transparent solar panels overlaid on the vertically built materials. They didn't let the wind and rain infiltrate the interior of the structure, but they did let sunlight faintly shine through.

It was dawn, but the storm shrouded away the sun, so only scant amounts of light passed through, refracted by the panel and casting a faint-blue glow over the Mirage Spire. It felt like dusk, when the sun was setting but the darkness of night hadn't quite settled in. An interstice of night and day, when a gloomy, cold blue washed over the air.

That ultramarine shade washed into the mesh of each level's floor, casting triangular patterns of light into the interior. Each beam was large enough for a Juggernaut to either walk across or reel up to. The sheer size and scale of this marine multistory building induced a sense of vertigo, as if one was in the midst of a daydream.

The topmost floor of the structure was likely meant to house the Morpho, as well as supplies of its ammunition and consumable parts. A rail, larger than multiple beams, extended all the way from Level Erze down to the bottom floor's western tip. That shadow, along with the ghosts' wailing and the shadowy pattern of the eternal dusk light flowing into the base, formed a backdrop. And with their backs to it, the distinctive metallic-colored shadows of countless Legion rose to their feet at once.

"Sir Reaper, as planned, our Alkonost unit shall scout ahead," Lerche said, hopping down from Chaika.

She was followed by a group of Alkonosts. Aside from the rails extending from the top floor, the only other way up was a metal-beam staircase forming a double helix. Of course, the enemy was lying in ambush across both routes up. The rail especially offered no cover from above, which meant that the higher they went, the easier it would become for them to be targeted from the top floor.

This meant they would have to go up using something that wasn't intended to be utilized as a footing. Such as the walls' beams, or the fulcrums dotting each floor. By using the units' light weight to their advantage, they would be able to use their wire anchor to climb up vertically in a straight line during this operation.

The Legion wouldn't overlook this, of course. As the Alkonosts ascended to Agate Two, a force of Grauwolf descended to surround

them. Behind them, Stier fixed their muzzles on them. Apparently, the composition of the base's defensive force consisted of Grauwolf and Stier.

The poor footing of this base made it difficult to deploy the heavyweight Löwe and Dinosauria. By contrast, the Grauwolf—which were lightweight and highly mobile—and the Stier—which were equally lightweight but possessed high firepower—were more effective in this terrain.

Of course, there were also Ameise surrounding the base. Serving as the eyes and ears for the other Legion types, they lay in wait in the shadows, following the invaders with their composite sensors.

Shin's ability allowed him to track the Legion's positions to an extent. As such, the scouting party's role was to compensate for Shin's inability to discern what Legion types were present, as well as decrease the enemy's numbers to some extent until the rest of the Eighty-Six advanced into this section of the base.

"We begin by crushing out their eyes... Hunt the enemy down, while prioritizing the Ameise."

Having finished unloading two Juggernaut detachments, the *Stella Maris* began retreating a hundred twenty kilometers away—outside the range of a Löwe's turret. Supercarriers were another relatively brittle type of ship. If the Legion were to board them, the ship would be scuttled, and the invasion force would be left stranded without a way back home.

This was a marine base located far from land, and the *Stella Maris* was the only means of crossing the sea to this point. That was the most dangerous factor in this operation.

The top floor of the Mirage Spire—Level Erze. There, the Morpho, which they assumed had run out of ammo, inched outside the circular canopy. Its turret aimed at the lowest possible angle of depression, and the railgun's rails came alive with crackling electricity, with the thundering sky as its backdrop.

This was the omen of a coming bombardment.

Its sights were fixed on the retreating *Stella Maris*, sailing defenseless in the face of its 800 mm shell.

"...Figures. I'd do the same if I were you," Ishmael muttered under his breath.

At that very moment, the three long-distance cruisers, which had sailed to three different positions around the Mirage Spire, fired their 40 cm turrets.

While these ships were meant for hunting down the leviathans lurking in the depths, the Fleet Countries, diminutive as they were,

lacked the funds to equip their ships with guided weapons. As such, the ship's armaments weren't meant for destroying ground targets. Instead, they were designed for casting depth charges up to a distance of several dozen meters ahead.

The accuracy of their bombardment on a naval target wasn't particularly high. However, their depth charges' built-in shells weighed in at nearly one tonne and were meant for hunting down large species of leviathans. With a range of thirty kilometers, they traveled at supersonic speeds, exceeding seven hundred eighty meters per second. And while they weren't made for the sole purpose of penetrating armor, their payload was tremendous.

Having left the canopy that protected it to fire at the Stella Maris, the Morpho exposed itself to the stormy weather. Shells rained down on it from three directions. The outer crust of the shells triggered at short range, spewing out the depth charge within it.

Depth charges meant to hunt down massive leviathans struck the Morpho's charge. Many of them were deflected by the main unit's armor, but one depth charge hit the base of its gun barrel. One of the long rails snapped at the base and went flying.

“—We’ve successfully destroyed the Morpho’s barrel... It’s as we expected. It has expanded the number of shells it can fire simultaneously since last year.”

Even though they'd expected that and the plan was for the cruisers to shoot the Morpho the moment it left the canopy's protection, Lena was nevertheless inside the Stella Maris when it was being aimed at by the railgun. Lena's chime-like voice was still a bit strained with fear and nerves. Out of consideration for her, Shin spoke calmly.

They were climbing up after the Alkonosts and were currently in the midst of suppressing Agate Two. Additionally, each individual component of the Morpho was heavy, making maintenance and the changing of ammunition a slow process. Despite that, the number of shells it could carry at any one time and the life span of the barrel were components that could be modified and improved. Last year, the Morpho's limits seemed to have been one hundred shots. Assuming things would remain unchanged during this operation would have been an overly optimistic estimate.

“Yes, but I can still hear its voice. It hasn't been downed. If it still has shells, it'll probably resume firing at the Stella Maris again as soon as its barrel is replaced.”

Which meant that was their limit for capturing this base and eliminating the Morpho.

They had assumed the Mirage Spire was a factory, but all its floors so far had been empty and the second Shepherd—which they assumed was the base’s control core—was on the top floor, same as the Morpho.

Their second target being in the same spot as the first was very much to their benefit, but... Shin still didn’t know what kind of unit the other Shepherd was.

“What’s our estimated time until it can replace the barrel?”

Put another way, their time limit for completing the operation—how long until the enemy shot down the Stella Maris—was...

“The interval between its bombardments on the Fleet Countries over the last month was a minimum of six hours... We should assume that’s how long it will take.”

Due to weight limitations, Lena and Vika had to decide which of their respective units to bring onto the ship. Lena’s Vanadis had superior calculation capabilities, but Vika’s Gadyuka was eventually chosen, its superior firepower being the deciding factor.

As he commanded the Alkonosts, which were acting as scouts, Vika squinted as he received a visual feed of the Mirage Spire via data link. He was sitting within the Stella Maris’s hangar, which was now empty of the Juggernauts that had filled it not too long ago.

Such a bizarre fortress, made entirely out of framework, like the skeleton of some huge, extinct creature... What was the purpose of its construction? Vika didn’t know. Zashya called it an arsenal, but it didn’t have any facilities for producing ammunition.

All they discovered was ammo that looked primed to be carried over to the Morpho for reloading. And this base couldn’t have simply been an artillery position for the Morpho, either. If that was the case, why build it so remotely, in the middle of the ocean?

The purpose of this place wasn’t clear. It also wasn’t clear where all the iron resources that went into building this base had even come from. Why would the Legion invest so much into this base when its value seemed to be so low?

No...

“The origin is fairly obvious.”

There were many countries that were still sealed off by the Eintagsfliege’s electromagnetic interference. Countless nations they still couldn’t contact. There was no way of confirming those countries even still existed. Even if any of those countries were to have perished in the large-scale offensive, their dying voices wouldn’t have reached the Federacy or the United Kingdom.

The fact that their downfalls weren’t confirmed...didn’t mean

those countries hadn't perished.

Yes, Zelene had said so. *The first large-scale offensive wasn't just a failed battle for the Legion.*

"...Your prediction might just be right on the money, Milizé."

In exchange for their light weight and high firepower, Stier were lacking in mobility and thinly armored. They were considered a Legion type optimized for ambushes. As such, they were set in thick artillery pockets built on every floor, where they rained fire upon the enemy as soon as they entered.

In addition, Grauwolf prowled the base, fearless of the ravine beneath them as they jumped through vertical space without any wires to support them. They lunged at the enemy, the high-frequency blades on their legs swinging with lethal accuracy.

Most menacing of all, though, were both the Eintagsfliege flocking down to Agate Three from Level Erze, unleashing a curtain of silver, and the Morpho's six-barreled revolving autocannon looming over them all.

Hearing the Legion's wailings and the Morpho's howl grow louder through his Resonance with Shin, Raiden brought Wehrwolf to a sudden stop and hopped back. The next moment, the spot right in front of him was torn apart by the diagonal trajectory of autocannon fire. The steel beam was reduced to scrap by the barrage, its coupling coming off and making the rest of the beam fall.

If this rapid-fire barrage of 40 mm shells were to hit them from above, it would penetrate even a heavily armored Vánagandr, to say nothing of a Reginleif. This autocannon was intended as an anti-aircraft gun, but the Morpho compensated for the long distance between it and the Reginleifs with mechanical precision, shooting through the beams with deadly accuracy. A red-hot shower of metal bore down on them, threatening to pierce the Juggernauts like a spear.

The autocannon depleted its several hundred bullets of ammunition in the flash of an eye, but even if it had any more, its barrel couldn't rotate indefinitely without overheating. Despite this, Raiden couldn't find a long enough interval between its shots. Last year, Undertaker single-handedly cut down all six of the Morpho's guns. Apparently, the Legion learned from that lesson and put even more guns on this Morpho.

At the edge of his vision, Raiden saw a Juggernaut jumping after scaling a fulcrum. This was one of the Juggernauts under the Spearhead squadron, led by Shin. It evaded a Grauwolf that slid down the fulcrum, and its blades swung down. The Juggernaut's wire anchor

was coiled around an upper level's beam, and by kicking away from the pillar, it avoided the trajectory of the enemy's rush.

Having missed its mark, the Grauwolf fruitlessly slid down as the suspended Juggernaut fixed its sights on its back.

But the next moment, a self-propelled mine lying hidden on the beam lunged at the Juggernaut. It was done at perfect timing, just as the Juggernaut's attention was fixed on the Grauwolf.

"...?!"

Raiden happened to be looking in that direction, so he was able to move in at just the right moment. At a hairbreadth, Wehrwolf fired. A barrage of heavy machine-gun fire moved like a single lump, slamming into the self-propelled mine from its flank, tearing it into two and blowing it away.

As the Grauwolf slid down, Undertaker had apparently also noticed the situation and shot it down. The missiles on its back triggered an induced explosion, making the Grauwolf disperse. The attacked Juggernaut's optical sensor turned in the direction of the blast, taken by surprise.

"...Thanks, you two. You saved me."

"Don't mention it, man. Just be careful."

Shin seemed to nod wordlessly at him, then connected his Para-RAID back to the rest of his unit, as well as Yuuto. Shin's serene, well-projected voice filled the battlefield.

"All units, we've confirmed the presence of self-propelled mines in the enemy's interception force. They're small and very easy to overlook. Don't rely on the data link too much, and stay vigilant."

Urging them to remain cautious—though his voice always seemed to suggest this—the Reaper then added:

"We still have a fair amount of time to complete this operation. We can't afford to be lax, but there's no need to rush, either."

After destroying the enemy in Agate Three's northeastern block, they finally seized control of Level Agate. Yuuto's Thunderbolt squadron entered the second level, Level Bertha, in place of Shin's Spearhead squadron. Bertha One's suppression began, and as it did, the Spearhead squadron, including Anju's Snow Witch, replenished their ammunition.

Leaving behind a force to guard Agate Three, they moved back to Agate Two, where four Scavengers equipped with wire anchors to follow them climbed up. Fido was the first to reach them and hurried over to restock Undertaker.

Horizontally, this base was vast, but there was less than a thousand meters between the bottom floor and the top floor, placing it within the minimum range of an anti-tank gun, a heavy machine gun, or an anti-tank missile. This, of course, also included the Morpho's revolving 40 mm autocannons, which were originally antiaircraft guns.

And so despite retreating from the fighting and taking a moment to restock, they couldn't let down their guard. With their Juggernauts' optical sensors vigilantly turned upward, Shana spoke.

"...It kind of makes you think, doesn't it?"

Meeting the people of the Open Sea clans made them realize this, but come to think of it, it was probably obvious. Just how precious pride could be.

"Seeing them go out like that, right in front of our eyes... I wonder what we'll do if we ever find ourselves in their position... Will we be able to smile like they did?"

Kurena knitted her brows grumpily, cutting into her words. Curtly, as if she was rejecting the very act of thinking about it.

"Shana, that's not something we should be thinking about right now."

"Then when should we think about it?"

That riposte rendered Kurena speechless. Shana continued, her voice pensive, as if she was more thinking aloud than speaking.

"If you ask me, we haven't been thinking enough about this very topic. If we ever do lose our pride, it'll happen the day we stop fighting. We already saw where fighting to the bitter end would land us when we climbed over that mountain of Sirin corpses back at the Revich Citadel... But we never once considered that we might not get a *bitter* end. This operation could be it, for all we know. And that's...something we should really be considering."

"Maybe, but now really isn't the time, Shana. I do get where you're coming from, though."

Raiden cut into their exchange, and Anju nodded in agreement. He was right. They were on the battlefield. They couldn't afford to cloud their minds with unnecessary thoughts. But even so, Shana's apprehensions were reasonable, and what she said was probably true.

In order to fight to the best of their ability, they had to cut away any thoughts and emotions they didn't need... And because this was the mindset they believed kept them alive, they eventually stopped thinking about anything that didn't pertain to the battlefield altogether.

"Right. Let's revisit this later... After this operation ends. While we watch the ocean."

Once that moment came, they wouldn't be able to push the conversation off till later... One day, they would no longer be able to make excuses.

The Reginleif's output was high compared with its weight, and that high mobility was a bit excessive when it came to horizontal maneuvering in this base. So Shin thought as he piloted Undertaker, feeling as if it had more power in it than room to expend it in this environment.

The only level space on any floor of the Mirage Spire consisted of beams. Besides those continual triangles, there was nothing on the surface—only a gaping abyss. He could easily sprint along the beam, but a vertical jump would require that he make a precise landing on the adjacent, diagonal beam, and he would need to constantly confirm how far it was at any point along the beam.

Jumping at the wrong time could make him miss his landing spot and plummet to the bottom, which was a situation he naturally wanted to avoid. The beam offered very little in terms of braking distance and width, so he only ever committed to small, safe jumps. The Reginleif couldn't exhibit the agile, savage sprinting it was made to perform on this battlefield.

But when it came to vertical movement, its high output and mobility became powerful weapons.

At the edge of his field of vision, he could see a pillar that supported the entire structure, as if knitted together by the steel frames that composed the tower. Within, his ability picked up on the presence of the enemy, and indeed, a large, steel-colored form awaited. It had eight legs like steel spikes, serving as lethal weapons in their own right. A gun turret coated in thick armor. A characteristic, coercive 120 mm smoothbore gun that Shin had seen more times than he'd cared to.

A Legion Tank type—a Löwe.

...It was effectively placed there as a fixed cannon, but that structurally sound position did afford them a way to deploy heavyweight Legion types. As obvious as it was, and while that point was solid enough to position a Löwe in, the way it was set in a point where multiple scaffoldings interconnected meant that blowing it up might be dangerous.

Shin evaded the APFSDS shell fired in his direction, willingly rolling off the beam he was on to the beams below him—the third level's first level, Carla One. Most armored weapons, the Löwe included, had difficulty swerving their turrets vertically, and so Undertaker approached it from below, from a point where the Löwe

couldn't comfortably shoot at it.

Accelerating rapidly to max speed, he soon reached the pillar the Löwe was hiding in. While maintaining this velocity, he brought Undertaker's legs to the structure and began sprinting up along the pillar. The Löwe turned its turret, swinging it to meet Undertaker, which simply kicked against the structure to avoid it and began running up another nearby pillar. Before long, he was positioned above the Löwe and behind its head.

The Löwe's body was squeezed into a corner of the truss structure, which now left it with nowhere to run as Undertaker lunged at its turret.

Armament selection: leg-attached 57 mm armor-piercing pile drivers. Trigger.

A tremor jolted through the Löwe.

The electromagnetic pile struck into it, and it convulsed for a moment before crumpling on the spot. The shock of the attack made the panels on the outer walls rattle and vibrate. Confirming its dying cry had petered out, Shin let out a breath.

This was fighting on high elevation. One wrong step could send him plummeting into a free fall. It was more nerve-racking than usual. They had finally successfully infiltrated all the way up to Carla Two. Only four more floors remained before they reached the top. Looking up at the floor extending above them made Shin felt shaken and jittery. Countless geometric patterns of light shone in, dark blue like the color of an unending twilight. The half-transparent panels coating the other walls and the fortress being shaped like a hexagonal prism cylinder came together, giving Shin the feeling that he was walking within a kaleidoscope.

It felt as if his inability to perceive this endless repetition, the sheer boundlessness of this shape was being thrust before his eyes. In the end, he couldn't truly perceive everything before his eyes... It made him realize just how diminutive he was. He was really no different than a fly.

...In the grand scale of things, humans...were unnecessary in this world.

This cold thought that had been ingrained in him in the Eighty-Sixth Sector crossed his mind, and Shin shook his head, dispelling it. Maybe it was because of what Ishmael said on the Stella Maris. They who would lose the history and pride of the Open Sea clans with this mission. It was as if it was meant to show the Eighty-Six their possible future. Even though the captain might not have intended to do so.

A blue space with shadow images dancing above one's head and

geometric patterns flickering at one's feet. Countless steel-colored Legion. As deep as one ventured into the Spire, the sights were all the same. It made Theo dizzy.

Just how far did they go? When had the fighting begun, and how long would it last? It was a winding hell of reflections, made of mirrors built against mirrors. It was a space of mirages and false images that seemed to stretch on forever.

How far had he advanced into this peculiar space? What was he seeking here? Where was he headed? It felt like being in this strange world was making him lose sense of himself.

I...

"Nouzen, you're at Level Dora. It's time for our shift."

"Yeah, thanks."

At some point, the Thunderbolt squadron had climbed up. Seeing this, Theo realized it was time to advance to the next floor. But suddenly, Yuuto, who was leading the Thunderbolt squadron, connected to him via the Resonance.

"Rikka? Fall back; it's our shift."

"Huh?" Theo asked back dumbly, at which point he came to his senses.

He'd misheard his instructions.

"...Sorry."

When it came to taking over the base, Shin's Spearhead squadron and Yuuto's Thunderbolt squadron alternated every three floors. They needed time to replenish ammunition and fuel, and most important of all, a person's concentration would wear thin from prolonged fighting. Theo was part of Shin's Spearhead squadron, which meant he'd need to fall back while the Thunderbolt squadron handled the fighting.

As Theo hurriedly cleared the way for them, Yuuto suddenly started speaking.

"I heard a legend somewhere that those who try to surpass humanity do it by scaling a tower."

"...Huh?"

"A tower at the end of the world, made up of spiral staircases. The higher one climbs, the more they discard their vices, prejudices, fears, and desires. And once they reach the top, they shed away all their suffering."

What was this story all of a sudden?

"Yuuto... Are you shaken up?"

But upon saying it, he realized that it was the other way around. Yuuto told him this random story to make Theo realize that he, himself, was shaken up. And so he listened, without cutting him off by saying that it wasn't something to talk about in the middle of an operation.

...Climbing a spiral staircase, and shedding away one's sufferings in the process. It wasn't unlike how they discarded their memories of happiness as they fought for their lives against the enemy, overcome by terror and indignation. How they continued to battle, forfeiting their natural instinct to live on.

Like the Eighty-Sixth Sector, where they were once locked up.

Yuuto spoke, his unit's optical sensor fixed on Laughing Fox like a pair of cold, emotionless eyes.

"Yeah. That speech from earlier made me think this tower might be that place."

Was this...really Yuuto he was speaking to? It almost felt like he was having a conversation with himself. It was as if all the doubts and misgivings he'd sealed away were being reflected onto Yuuto and coming out as his words.

"When I heard that story in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, it got me thinking. If the Eighty-Six were to scale that tower, would they be able to do it without discarding their pride? Or would they lose even that?"

If they were to die now, would they make it to the bitter end with their pride intact? Or would they go out like the Open Sea clans and leave absolutely everything on the battlefield?



The sea roared loudly.



"—Mm..."

Shin blinked, hearing a voice from *below*. A wailing unlike human speech, or anything he'd heard from the Legion. It wasn't a machine's words, nor was it a human's scream. It was an utterly foreign sound—one he could not compare to any other sound he had ever heard before.

And it was coming from below.

"From under the sea...?"

The strike force was currently on the fourth level—the lowest floor of level Dora: Dora One. The Thunderbolt squadron was currently handling the fighting, while Shin and his Spearhead squadron were restocking on Level Carla's highest floor. As soon as they were finished, they would ascend to Level Erze, where the Morpho lay in wait.

With the level cleared, there was no sign of the enemy, but Level

Dora was still full of enemies, and Level Erze's underbelly was full of Eintagsfliege. And of course, there was the Morpho, which was obstructed by their silver wings. While still wary of the enemies above, Shin looked down at the floors they had already passed.

Far below him, impeded by both the storm and the depths of the sea, was a world unlike the surface. A place governed not by light and air but by darkness and water, the realm of cold-blooded creatures.

Right now, he couldn't hear that voice anymore... But he refused to believe he'd imagined it.

"Lena... Is there any way you can scout what's going on under the sea? It...sounded like there was something down there."

"Under the sea...? I'll check," Lena replied, turning her eyes to Ishmael.

She shortly explained Shin's request, only for Ishmael to quizzically nod while saying the sonar did not detect anything at present. The radar was of little use in this situation, since unlike in open air, the radar waves were hampered when traveling underwater. The sonar, however, was the main scouting tool for underwater environments. It made use of sound waves to detect distant enemy vessels or leviathans lurking in the depths.

Ishmael phoned in the order to the sonar room and soon got a response.

"Brother, there's a leviathan singing in the waters. It's pretty far, though... Could that be the cause?"

"...For real?" Ishmael groaned.

This time, Lena watched him curiously as he looked up and whispered bitterly.

"Yeah, I imagine you'd be pissed with us shooting up the place right under your nose... But I'm begging you, stay the hell away from us now."

"A leviathan...?" Shin blinked as Lena relayed the response to him. "I suppose I wouldn't confuse that voice for a Legion's, but..."

His ability didn't perceive physical noise, but the final thoughts and words of ghosts that lingered after death. It was hard to imagine he'd mix up the cry of a living creature like a leviathan with a Legion's wail.

He couldn't deny the possibility altogether. Upon reaching the Fleet Countries, he did hear a leviathan's song faintly in the distance. The open waters the leviathans roamed were several hundred kilometers away from the shore, and yet their voices did reach the

mainland. So perhaps a leviathan's "song" wasn't conveyed by sound but was categorically similar to a Legion's wailing in nature.

"Roger that. But stay alert just the same."

"Yes, that's always our intention. Hmm... Captain, you should remain vigilant, too."

She'd added those words hurriedly, her voice suppressed. Shin blinked once in surprise.

"Your progress in securing the base is going faster than planned... If you feel pressured somehow, then—"

"...Right."

The words Ishmael told them before the battle with the Morpho began. A few hours had passed, and everyone looked calm on the surface. But truth be told, quite a few of the Eighty-Six were still shaken up by it. As their commander, Shin had noticed. That was why he'd urged them to be watchful of their surroundings. He'd warned them that fighting with one's field of vision so narrowed would be dangerous. And even still, they weren't being cautious enough.

"Roger. The operation's entering its endgame, so it's about time fatigue sets in... We'll be careful."

"Hmm. To clarify, by no means am I finding fault with your command—"

"I know that... Lena, we're... At least, I'm fine."

Yes, don't worry. I won't lose my way like I did in the United Kingdom. If anything, that taught me that I can live even without anyone to turn to.

That was likely Ishmael's intent... Something within Shin had changed so much that he could realize that on his own.

And that was why what she needed to worry about in this mission wasn't him. After a moment's thought, he switched over his transmission to everyone and continued:

"—About the leviathan bones we saw before. Nicole, I think it was called? I've actually seen it once before the war started."

Despite the sudden change in subject, and it being a subject that wasn't at all pertinent to this operation at that, he could feel Lena nod on the other side of the Resonance.

"...Yes."

"If it weren't for the war, it might have even inspired me to research it. When I was little, I was...well, as interested in monsters as most people are, I think."

Lena seemed to have understood. And despite that, she regarded him with an intentionally teasing sort of voice.

"I know... The fake reports you sent me all the time in the Eighty-Sixth Sector were always so bombastic and exaggerated. I can imagine you really had trouble writing that last one. It read

like you were fighting a monster from some old cartoon or something."

She jabbed back at him with an old memory he'd managed to forget by now. Shin let out a strange sort of groan. Right. That did happen. He'd assumed no Handler would actually care enough to read a report, so he had kept sending the same report for months. He had no intent of actually writing a serious one, so he'd basically fabricated the whole contents of the report. He'd written that particular report soon after drafting, back when he was eleven years old... Looking back on it now, that report mostly felt embarrassing to think about.

"Are you taking care to write your reports properly now?"

"I do. I mean, someone is reading them this time around. Assuming you're not using them to make paper airplanes."

"Oh, didn't you know? It's a good way to gauge the quality of the report. In the case of a bad one, its contents are too light, so it flies better."

"Harsh..."

Hearing their commanding officers talk, some of the Eighty-Six chuckled through the Resonance. Their tension seemed to melt a little... As uncharacteristic as their exchange might have been, it proved useful in its own way.

"...Be careful out there."

"I will be."

As that unusual exchange did manage to get a fit of laughter out of him, Theo spoke. Unnecessary stress, excitement, or unrest could negatively impact an operation. At times like those, casual, frivolous conversation could be an effective countermeasure. But he never expected it out of stone-faced Shin and straitlaced Lena, of all people.

And it wasn't just them. Yuuto was the first to bring something up in casual conversation to distract him.

"By the way, Shin. Rito said the same thing."

There was an odd pause. Shin was frowning, apparently.

"Why don't you go for it? Research, that is. You could join Rito."

"...Research sounds like a nice idea, but I'd rather not be Rito's babysitter."

"Wow, mean." Theo chuckled and then continued. "You know, Shin, you..."

He tried to ask his question as casually as he spoke before, but it didn't seem to work.

"Are you sure coming to this operation...was a good idea?"

Undertaker's optical sensor swiveled gently in his direction. Behind the artificial crimson glow of that sensor was a pair of equally

bloodred eyes that had grown to be far more evocative than they were before.

Shin's changed.

He had developed an earnest desire to live...and began wishing for happiness. He had willingly met his grandparents, from whom he'd been separated by the war. This Reaper, who would save anyone in the Eighty-Sixth Sector but would never find salvation for himself, had learned how to express his feelings to that crybaby of a Handler—the only one who ever tried to save him.

He's completely different from me... I can't bring myself to go anywhere.

“I mean, coming with us. Fighting in this war. Should you really still be a Processor? I mean...you don't have to fight anymore.”

But as he said those words, it dawned on him. No. It wasn't that Shin didn't need to fight anymore. Theo *didn't want him* to fight anymore.

Because he didn't have to any longer. The pride to fight to the bitter end wasn't the only thing he had, and the battlefield was no longer the only place he belonged. And if that was the case, Theo didn't want him to fight. He didn't want him to be there. The battlefield was a place that took until there was nothing left to take.

Just like Ishmael and the people of the Open Sea clans. No matter how precious their pride was, no matter how strongly they held on to it, they had lost it so easily. Laughably so. And that made him remember something he seemed to have forgotten at some point since leaving the Eighty-Sixth Sector.

Pride was the one thing you gained from fighting until the bitter end. Nothing more. And that pride was a transient, fickle thing. One could never know when it might be taken from them.

There was nothing in this world that could not be taken away. That was, perhaps, the one, irrefutable truth. Losing things to the absurdities of life was just the way of the world.

And if that's the truth, you...you...if no one else...should leave before something else is taken from you. Before you lose everything. Just like the captain did.

“You should quit the war... Forget about all this.”

They were words that bordered on insult for an Eighty-Six. If nothing else, hearing them come from Theo's lips must have been especially offensive. But Shin simply cracked a small, bitter smile.

“Theo... Who were you *really* talking to just now?”

Theo froze up. He'd been overlapping the old captain's image with Shin. These were words he'd wanted to tell the captain, and Shin could see right through him. At some point, the Para-RAID had been set so that he and Shin were only talking to each other.

“Yeah. You’re right. Maybe I don’t have to fight anymore. I can’t say pride is all I have anymore, or that I have nowhere to go but the battlefield... But I can’t get where I want to go unless I fight. And more importantly than that, I don’t want to live while being ashamed of myself.”

So long as I don’t bring shame to myself, I’m satisfied.

If I don’t, I’d never be able to look the fleet commander in the eye.

“So that’s why...”

Suddenly, another Resonance target joined their exchange. A flat, cold voice.

“Nouzen. We’ve seized control of Level Dora.”

Shin fell silent, then switched his Para-RAID’s targets from only Theo to all the troops under his command. His tone had changed from his casual one to his voice as operations commander for the Strike Package.

“Roger that. All units, we’re entering the top floor. It’s time to take out the Morpho.”



The enemy force had finally reached its vicinity. They had gotten close enough to open hostilities. The Morpho—and the ghost inhabiting it—admitted this fact, gritting its nonexistent teeth in frustration.

Using this defensive function should have been a measure it never needed to resort to, *given this base’s function and purpose*. But it had been left with no other choice. If it were *to be destroyed before it was completed*, they would have truly lost everything.

<<Colare One to Colare Synthesis. Activate defensive mechanism at minimal configuration.>>



At the edge of Shin’s field of vision, an explosive bolt triggered. The beams holding the scaffolding in place all crumbled at once. The floor directly beneath Level Erze, Dora Three, gave out. The grid-like, kaleidoscopic floor collapsed under their feet.

“What...?!”

Shin, who had just fired an anchor into that floor, preparing to reel himself up to Dora Three, was sent helplessly plummeting down. Yuuto and the Thunderbolt squadron, who had been deployed there to cover for them, also fell. Before they could secure a landing, another bolt exploded, this time tearing apart Dora Two.

Their consorts hurriedly approached Dora One’s corners or

jumped down to Level Carla to clear space for a landing. Just barely avoiding the shower of steel beams, the Alkonosts nimbly clung to Dora Two's walls.

As soon as he was about to jump onto Dora Three's beams, the cave-in happened. This placed him in a poor position. Shin adjusted Undertaker's position in midair, somehow successfully landing on one of Dora One's beams.

"...!"

Compared with the Vánagandr, the Reginleif was built for high-mobility combat and equipped with powerful shock absorbers. But the unexpected collapse and fall resulted in a rebound shock that nearly knocked Shin out cold. Undertaker's legs froze up. The other Reginleifs around him didn't fare much better; some dangled from a beam using their wire anchors, while others landed, the air knocked out of their Processors' lungs.

They all stood fatally seeded in place—an unavoidable, shameful display owing to their humanity. Aiming at that opening, the revolving autocannons composedly parted the silvery veil of the Eintagsfliege as they took aim. These eight antiair armaments turned their barrels on the water—at the flock of paralyzed spiders, suspended and frozen between heaven and sea.

And then Shin heard *something* descending, sliding along the walls of the fortress. As the floor collapsed, something awakened, its freeze status lifted. Both their optical sensors and radar systems couldn't pick up anything, but Shin could hear it. The sound of a ghost. A mechanical voice.

It only took a moment, but the effects of adrenaline drew it out. It was unavoidable. Too quick to follow with the naked eye. They looked up helplessly as the autocannons' motors began to whirl—

"Darya."

"By your will."

Eight Alkonost units lunged off Dora Three, plummeting directly into the line of fire between the autocannon and the Juggernauts. Alkonosts were relatively small units, but a machine gun's muzzle couldn't expand its firing radius. Their positioning was good enough to cover for the Juggernauts.

"Let us meet again, everyone. In the next battle."

The autocannons spewed fire, their 40 mm rounds tearing the Alkonosts to shreds with their immense firepower. The Alkonosts' slender limbs and cockpits were reduced to shreds, along with the Sirins that occupied them. With several of the units, the high explosives they packed for self-destruction purposes triggered in an induced explosion, blowing them up in midair.

The intense shock waves and flames produced a heat wave that

blew past the autocannon and extended outside the fortress. The Juggernauts just barely assumed evasive maneuvers, the blast lighting up their ivory armors with a red glow.

The Juggernauts somehow evaded both the autocannon fire and the heat wave's blast. Looking up at her monitor and breathing a sigh of relief, Lena pursed her lips bitterly. Those girls might have called this a worthwhile exchange... But she didn't want to get used to making this kind of sacrifice.

"...I'm sorry, Vika. Thank you, you saved us."

"It's fine. That's their role."

Combat was ongoing. His words were curt, as if to remind her not to waste time needlessly.

"That trap just now."

"I doubt it can pull that off again. If it could do that whenever it wanted, it would have done so as soon as the Juggernauts got in."

...So Vika's conclusion was the same as hers. The Mirage Spire was the railgun's artillery position, and it was shaped as a tall tower. It stood at the heart of the sea, exposed to storms and intense winds with nothing to impede the railguns for many kilometers. Discarding the beams that supported it horizontally meant the Spire would be that much weaker to the blowing winds. The railgun wouldn't be able to maintain its accuracy that way. This was a negative condition the Mirage Spire and the Morpho would not be able to tolerate. They couldn't simply drop away entire floors that easily.

"The more troublesome thing is the second, unknown unit's attack... I'll handle analyzing it. Vera, Yanina, move to cover the Juggernauts at your discretion in case they can't dodge."

The Sirins weren't human, but they were capable of executing simple orders without a Handler to command them. Ordering the petite, clockwork girls that served as platoon captains to act autonomously, Vika booted up Gadyuka's systems to perform an analysis.

"Lerche, fall back for a while and deploy your Cicada... Observe everything."

Exposed to the intense blast, the Eintagsfliege's brittle, silver butterfly wings wavered like grass as they took to the sky, blowing away the gentle veil they'd created and momentarily exposing the Morpho in all its glory to the Reginleifs.

Fundamentally, its appearance was exactly the same as the one

Shin fought a year ago. Two wings that looked to be wove from silver threads, extending to the heavens. A blue, will-o'-the-wisp-like optical sensor that lit up against the black outline of the stormy sky. A black armor module, like the scales of a dragon. A gigantic, eleven-meter-long form. And most striking of all, a barrel in the shape of two lances—though one of them was broken now.

Like a dragon emerging from the sea, the rain and thunder heralded its coming.

The only things to set it apart from the Morpho that Shin knew of were the four pairs of metallic legs extending from between its wings. They were long, bewitching legs, like those of a spider sitting in the center of a silver web. And at their tips were 40 mm revolving autocannons, like the dilapidated wings of a sick bird.

A set of gun arms, reflecting the light.

The autocannons began rotating, each of their individual sights fixed on a different Juggernaut.

Fire.

This time, the Juggernauts dispersed, avoiding the diagonal rows of sweeping armor-piercing rounds. The beams they were on were just wide enough to accommodate their size, but they were in the same triangular pattern. Having climbed all the way up from Level Agate to Level Dora, they'd grown used to fighting in this environment.

Undertaker dodged by making small, repeated hops, braking as soon as the gunfire paused. It fixed its sights on the Morpho, hoping to counterattack. But then, from the bottom of the highest floor, where there was nothing—no, where it couldn't even hear anything—something fired at it.

“...?!”

Canceling firing sequence, Undertaker moved over to an adjacent beam, evading the lethal spear hurtling toward it. The Morpho's voice howled, signaling another attack. As soon as Undertaker hopped away to another beam, the one it had just been on went flying, peppered by a barrage of 40 mm machine-gun rounds.

Following that, multiple targets descended on it from a place it couldn't see, moaning and sobbing as they did. They surrounded Undertaker, moving horizontally along the grid as they fired red, gleaming heat rays. The Weisel's extension units and protectors—the Fire Extension types, the Biene.

“Tch...!”

Launching a wire anchor downward, Shin swung down to Carla Three in what was almost a free fall, avoiding their attack. Clicking his tongue once, he looked up. He couldn't see the Biene coming, nor the autocannons gearing up for another barrage.

This must mean...

“Optical camouflage...!” he heard Theo hiss nearby.

By being covered by Eintagsfliege, which were able to deflect all waves, be they electronic or light, the Phönix was able to effectively become a Legion type that was invisible both to the naked eye and the radar. It seemed the Legion had begun applying that technology to other types now.

Burned by the intense temperatures of the autocannon and the Biene’s heat rays, butterfly wings flaked off the Eintagsfliege and turned to ash. Some of the Eintagsfliege that roosted on the top floor’s beams fluttered down, settling into the burned-off spots and disappearing... They joined forces with the rest of the camouflage flock, compensating for those that had burned off.

Raiden turned his machine guns on the enemy, hoping to counterattack... But before he could manage it, he had to jump away and avoid the autocannon’s fire.

“No good,” he spat out bitterly. **“Damn pests keep hiding in their nest.”**

Just below the Morpho’s roost on the top floor, on Level Dora, the Biene retreated to the underbelly of the top floor after firing. That spot alone had multiple beams converge together to form what looked like a thick iron lattice. Cannon shells and machine-gun fire, which moved in a linear manner, couldn’t penetrate it easily.

“...The Biene are only ever going to come out when they shoot,” Anju lamented. **“This is annoying.”**

Since he could hear their voices, Shin could track them even when they were camouflaged. He could track them...but there were simply too many of them. Warning everyone every time they fired was too much. And to make things worse, it wasn’t as if every single one of the Morpho’s autocannons had its own independent central processor, so he couldn’t perfectly predict how they’d move, either... The most he could do was warn them just as it was about to fire.

As he kept his eyes fixed on the few autocannons that weren’t camouflaged, making sure they weren’t beginning to rotate, Shin examined his wire anchor’s status screen. The wire anchors were, for all intents and purposes, his literal lifelines in this battle, so he carefully checked for any errors or malfunctions.

He couldn’t track all the Biene, and he couldn’t see how the autocannons would move at all. But so long as they could keep dodging...so long as they could buy time while maintaining their forces, they could gather information and use that time.

“Lena.”

“...Yes. Leave the optical camouflage to me.”

Lena nodded as, underneath the Federacy uniform she was wearing, the Cicada emitted a faint, violet-silver glow. This was why they insisted on bringing units capable of artillery support with the strike force, even when it meant they could deploy fewer units in total.

However, the external panels of the fortress proved more durable than expected, and the artillery Juggernauts' 88 mm canister shots couldn't reliably destroy them. Some of the canisters might have been able to slip through the large canopy covering the top floor, but that wouldn't have enough firepower...

She could hear Ishmael and Esther whispering to each other next to her. They must have been frustrated at being unable to help the strike force's struggle. As holo-screens displayed their footage from within the fortress, they spoke to each other rapidly, in whispers.

“—Covering fire. Can't the Stella Maris's main turret help here?”

“It probably won't penetrate. And look at how close they are; we can't ignore the possibility of accidentally hitting friendly units.”

“We're talking about 40 cm shells here. Even if it isn't a direct hit, the Juggernaut's thin armor won't hold up...”

“Then do we use anti-leviathan guns? At this distance, with the wind being this strong?”

“...No. That'd be even worse.”

The wind... The wind!

Lena looked up at once. It might be hard from the outside, but...

“Captain, I need your cooperation... Lend me the Stella Maris's main gun!”

Upon hearing Lena's idea through the Para-RAID, Vika spoke. Chaika's optical sensor analyzed the Biene's attack patterns, and they were now on display on Gadyuka's holo-window.

“My analysis requires a little more information. Nouzen, Crow, I'm sorry, but I'm going to need you to put up with it a bit longer.”

At this point, the Eighty-Six wouldn't grumble in the face of such an unreasonable demand. Neither of them even responded to his request, as if he was expecting the obvious out of them, and Lena continued instead.

“As soon as the analysis is complete, we'll switch to a counterattack. Report in, Shin, Yuuto.”

Before she could even finish that order, the experienced Name Bearers of the Eighty-Sixth Sector replied without any hesitation.

“...We should go for the revolving autocannons and the Biene.”

“I'll set everyone up with that in mind while prioritizing evasion.”

They were under the constant pressure of having to evade invisible barrages and lines of fire, while also having to be wary of their footing. Having to climb up under those conditions strained and fatigued their nerves. Some took wrong turns, resulting in them being shot at, or forgot their consort units were nearby and bumped into other Juggernauts. Others took a wrong stop, falling over to a lower level. The numbers of casualties and injured were growing.

Seeing this happen, Kurena gritted her teeth within Gunslinger. Her job was to eliminate any enemies that threatened Shin or her comrades. The very role that Gunslinger's sniper configuration was expected to perform was to creep through this mesh and snipe down high-priority targets like the Morpho. This was the skill she had honed to carve out a place for herself at Shin's side.

And yet here she was, incapable of aligning her sights on the Morpho.

The impatience was overcoming her.

Sniping blind was a hard stunt to pull. There was a total of twenty-four revolving autocannons firing on them in tandem. Meanwhile, the Biene drew a grid on them from the outer circumference of the base with their heat rays; they were capable of attacking in a radius from all directions and firing at random from a vertical angle.

There were too many of both of them, and with Shin's warnings coming too late, the Eighty-Six were forced to constantly remain on the defensive because of their vast range. So with this web of beams between her and her target, a weak shot would achieve little. She couldn't counterattack.

The irritation seethed in her chest.

"I'm...his comrade. An Eighty-Six, the same as Shin. And we'll always be the same. We're those who fight to the bitter end. That'll never change."

She forcibly pushed away the recollection that the very person who told her that would lose her own pride today.

The sights of an autocannon that had fixed on Shiden's Cyclops suddenly stopped...and focused on Gunslinger instead. With that black muzzle glaring at her, Kurena came to a realization.



“A bluff...?!” She swallowed nervously.

She wouldn't dodge in time. Time screeched to a halt as she expected the impact to come, instinctually shrinking in place.

But the next moment...

...an 88 mm tank shell's roar boomed through the area as it struck the revolving autocannon's flank. The autocannon burst into flames, going out of commission. The next moment, the Morpho purged the cannon, like an insect cutting off its own leg. The autocannon fell loudly to the ground, leaving behind a trail of black smoke.

The one who shot it was...Undertaker. Shin.

“**You all right, Kurena?**” came the familiar voice.

Kurena sighed in relief.

What the hell...?

Tears of relief welled up in her eyes. Yes, she'd be fine. Come what may, things would always work out, just like they did this time. Her Reaper would never...ever abandon her.

So she would be fine.

“Yeah!”

Shin breathed out in relief as he confirmed he had successfully covered for Gunslinger, who had fallen for the Morpho's blatant bluff. The wails his ability perceived weren't physical sound. Unlike radar detection, it couldn't be shared through data link with the others. At this point, this limitation struck him as irritating.

Even if he could detect the Legion's positions and the timing of their attacks, that wasn't enough to save everyone. It frustrated him greatly.

It was the same as the matter with Frederica. He didn't want to rely on miracles, and he didn't want to sacrifice her. But at the same time, he didn't want any choice he made to result in the deaths of those he held dear.

He didn't want to take the Eighty-Six's deaths for granted.

He realized how absurd of a demand he was making. In a way, he was wishing for a miracle that would fix everything more than anyone else. But he didn't want to give up and resign himself. If there was any chance of taking a road that would result in no one being sacrificed, he wanted to choose it.

Because, after all...they'd already left the Eighty-Sixth Sector.

After a frustratingly long amount of time, Vika finally reported that he'd completed his analysis. Each Juggernaut's respective position

within the Mirage Spire was transmitted to the integrated bridge's holo-screen through the data link. After regarding Vika's report with a glance, Lena nodded.

"Vika, I momentarily leave command over the fire-restriction and area-suppression units in your hands."

"Roger that. All aforementioned units, adjust your sights according to the instructions I just sent you."

"Shin, Yuuto, keep command of your vanguards as is. I leave the timing for when to charge to you."

"Roger."

"Artillery squadron, reload and change ammunition over to antipersonnel buckshot shells."

Those were brought in addition to the incendiary bombs, due to the possibility the Reginleifs, with their fire-sensitive aluminum-alloy armor, might end up in melee battle.

Finally, Lena turned her eyes to the commander of the Orphan Fleet, which wasn't under her jurisdiction.

"Captain Ishmael."

"Yeah, we're ready."

Shin and Yuuto reported they were all in position. Gazing up at the image of the Mirage Spire on the holo-screen, Lena took one deep breath and transmitted two words to everyone.

"Commence operation."



While it might have been able to change out a worn-out barrel quickly enough, the Morpho didn't have time to replace a broken one. And so it hadn't been able to eliminate the enemy unit yet. All its sensors—with the exception of its antiair radar—as well as its three sets of twenty-four revolving autocannons, were aimed downward.

It directed the Biene and Eintagsfliege under its command while firing barrages of continual gunfire at the enemy, when suddenly, its sensors picked up on a sound whirring through the roar of its rapidly revolving autocannons. Faint noise that it should not have been able to hear.

With the exception of the Ameise, the Legion's sensors were relatively low-performance. The Morpho was no exception. In contrast to its overwhelming firepower, its sensors were quite weak. The sounds of the battle taking place beneath it pretty much blinded out its auditory sensors.

And yet it could just barely make out the sound of a howl in the distance.

Lena's dignified voice rose as she gazed into the model of the Mirage Spire on the holo-screen.

"All Juggernaut units, evacuate!"

"Fire!" Ishmael ordered.

At that order, the Stella Maris's main turrets, a set of four 40 cm guns, fired. Shells that would eviscerate anyone they landed in the vicinity of took to the air, shaking up the deck. The roar reached the artillery Juggernauts, which were situated nearby.

The shells flew from the direction of the Stella Maris's bow, above the Mirage Spire. Traveling at eight hundred meters per second, they rapidly soared above the tower, where their timed fuses triggered. The shells' exteriors were blown off, the explosion unleashing small depth charges, which were meant for hunting gigantic scaled sea creatures. Though their size was relative, each one was up to a dozen meters long. The depth charges dug into Level Dora's external panels and then burst, unleashing a wave that spanned over a large area and effortlessly smashed everything in its way.

"—They might be able to block 88 mm shells, but not 40 cm explosives. And..."

As the panels shattered to pieces, the destructive wave rushed into the tower's interior. The panels that blocked the base like a dragon's scale flew inside, along with the destructive gale that crushed them. And with the panels gone, the violent winds of the storm also blew in.

With the powerful wind coming from the outside all at once, the internal pressure of the Mirage Spire suddenly spiked.

"The wind pressure of this storm can blow everything from the inside out!"

The wind pressure sought an exit, and the next moment, an intense force struck the exterior panels that were still intact on Level Dora from the inside, sending them all away with the force of an explosion!

Blue shards rained around the Spire, falling down into the water. The intense wind blew through Level Dora, which now stood exposed to the elements, blowing upward... The Eintagsfliege's brittle wings lacked the power to resist this powerful gale. The Eintagsfliege contained high energy reserves, but their mass was small. The beam particles they unleashed lost to the wind, which tore their wings away.

And as if waiting for that momentary gap...!

"Artillery squadron, open fire!"

Sitting upon the Stella Maris's deck, the artillery Regineif squadron fired a volley of missiles. Canister shots containing

antipersonnel buckshot whizzed into the exposed Level Dora or drew an arc and soared to the top of the tower, approaching the Morpho from both below and above. Bursting in midair, the buckshot fell like hail and formed a shower of metal as a flock of spears soared to the heavens, both of them striking Level Erze.

The canopy above the Morpho protected its large turret from being damaged, but each level of the Spire's scaffoldings was built identically, so as to not impede the autocannons' line of fire. The 40 mm rounds could cross through their gaps, and so the smaller antipersonnel buckshot shells could get through them like raindrops.

However, these shells couldn't penetrate an armored infantry's reinforced exoskeleton and were ineffective against the Reginleif's minimal Feldreß armor. They couldn't hope to damage the Morpho's thick armor module.

But they could hurt unarmored targets that weren't protected in order to make sure they remained lightweight. Like the brittle Eintagsfliege. As they sat trapped within the cage of steel beams, the intense gale of wind having blown off their wings and legs, the Eintagsfliege lost their capacity to hang on to the Legion unit standing above them. As they, along with the Eintagsfliege swarming along the top floor's underside, were blown away by the wind and pelted by the buckshot rounds, more Eintagsfliege fluttered down from above to block their consort from taking damage.

Countless Biene and sixteen revolving autocannons hidden by optical camouflage were exposed at long last.

“Fire-restriction and area-suppression units, adjust your sights!”

Next up, Vika gave his orders. After the bombardment, they would need to progress the operation from both inside and outside the Spire. Lena alone couldn't command both forces, so she gave orders to the groups within the fortress, while he directed the ones on the outside. Reginleifs equipped with autocannons, buckshot guns, or multi-rocket launchers each scattered to their respective attack ranges, their sights fixed on the silver wings fluttering in the stormy wind. At the edge of their line of fire, several Biene revealed themselves.

In order to produce heat rays capable of penetrating a Juggernaut, they would require large reserves of energy. But being among the smallest of the Legion's armaments, the Biene possessed low energy reserves. They couldn't fire for prolonged periods of time without replenishing their power.

There was no sign of them using disposable energy packs. In which case, they got their energy from an external source—the base itself. The Juggernauts couldn't see it, but they probably had some

kind of wired connection, or maybe they only connected to it when firing. Either way, it seemed that while their firing positions may have seemed random, they were limited.

This was a conclusion they had reached through Chaika's analysis. The Biene's firing positions were far greater than their numbers, which meant that while they didn't have to be in any one spot to fire, they always had to occupy at least one of the firing spots to shoot their heat rays.

And so each of those firing points' positions had been distributed between the Juggernauts. Points along the metal beams' fulcrums, which no longer had any optical or electronic camouflage, as well as the gun barrels set against the pillars, where the Biene stood, were now stripped of their camouflage.

True to the etymology of their names, they were like wingless bees. Six-legged machines, with the metallic color typical of the Legion. In place of a stinger, their abdomens contained mechanisms for firing out heat rays and blue, gleaming optical sensors. A pair of their legs and their insect-like stingers were attached to the fulcrums or pillars, inserted deep into holes set into them to recharge.

These were the firing points' fixtures—in other words, the power sockets that provided them energy from the base.

Their legs served as terminals that were inserted into the fixture, meaning the Biene couldn't immediately flee if they were to be attacked while firing. They were small and lightweight, which meant they were more susceptible to the powerful winds. The fact that these Biene were plugged into the fixtures and motionless when the wind blew in effectively saved them.

“Fire!”

The 40 mm autocannons and the 88 mm buckshot cannons attacked as one, also firing the heavy machine guns mounted onto their grappling arms. All those weapons howled and roared in a chorus that rattled the Mirage Spire.

Lying in anticipation of an opportune moment, Undertaker watched as the Eintagsfliege's optical camouflage came undone. The silver butterflies' wings were torn off and blown away, exposing the gun mount arms that held three sets of twenty-four autocannons.

Seeing there were no Biene where the sights had been aimed, the fire-restriction Juggernauts rapidly switched their targets. First, they shot two that had extended to shoot. Next, all the Juggernauts equipped for long-distance sniping, including Gunslinger, blew away eight of them hidden in the grid.

High-explosive projectiles burst, and buckshot and machine-gun

rounds flew through the air, bringing fire to their targets. The Biene went up in induced explosions.

The entirety of Level Dora flickered red and black with fire, blocking off the Morpho's sensors. Undertaker sprinted through the rolling flames, making its way up to face it. Two of the fourth level's floors were missing, so it kicked against the walls, attaching its anchor to the beams' fulcrums to reel itself up at once.

Reaching the underbelly of the top floor, which was like a grid or a cage, it tore its way through with its high-frequency blade, finally reaching the top floor.

It could hear two booming howls, the roars of the two ghosts. They both came from within the Morpho. One was likely the Morpho's central processor, and the other was likely a sub-processor, meant to control the revolving autocannons. Those were added after last year's defeat, due to the Morpho's increased importance.

Replaying their final moments like broken music boxes, they chanted their malice and hatred again and again.

Heil dem Reich. Heil dem Reich. Heil dem Reich. Heil dem Reich...

Just as Ernst had predicted and Zelene had said, these were remnants of someone from the old Imperial faction.

As Shin cut his way through and jumped up, he approached the Morpho's position. The Morpho's thirty-meter-long barrel couldn't shoot at this range, even if it hadn't been damaged. Shin was firmly within the long-distance cannon's blind spot. Behind the turret were its two cooling wings, turned toward the sky as they crumbled. Undoing the conduction wires it employed for melee combat, it swung their taloned ends down at Undertaker.

The Morpho was much less proficient at melee combat, and this was its last resort. But this was something Shin had already witnessed last year. The wings lost their shape, but even so, the conduction wire spread out, rising into the air. It still had some distance from Undertaker. But before it could close it, the artillery's incendiary bombs landed.

The fire the bombs spewed burned the wires, rendering them powerless. They lost their conductivity, falling down only to be mowed down by Undertaker's blade. Undertaker then hopped over behind the Morpho's turret, landing on the maintenance hatch between the Morpho's first pair of wings.

One year ago, this was where the first Morpho's central processor, Frederica's knight, was hidden. And just like back then, the Morpho thrashed like a centipede burning in acid, trying to shake Undertaker off.

Calling up his armament options, Shin selected the 57 mm armor-piercing pile bunkers, triggering all four of them at once. The tremors

made his unit's sights fix on the enemy's fuselage. Withstanding the shaking that almost made him bite his tongue, he once again switched his armaments, this time selecting the 88 mm tank turret.

He pulled the trigger.

The Morpho reeled back for a moment like it was screaming, then stiffened for a moment. It rotated its broken turret backward, as if attempting to bash Undertaker with it.

"Tch..."

Shin avoided it, purging the piles. With the Juggernaut being as light as it was, a sweeping blow from the heavy turret could be fatal. Shin hopped off the Morpho's back, avoiding the grid-like floor and firing his anchor into Dora Three's wall.

...I missed.

Apparently, he'd destroyed the sub-processor that controlled the autocannons on the gun mount arm. It seemed they'd switched the processor's position since last year. Looking up, he saw the Morpho regarding him haughtily. It had lost all its armaments and been deprived of all the consort units that guarded it. But even still, it packed the sheer might and dignity that came with possessing the largest turret of any Legion unit.

Behind it, Shin saw a blue sky. The storm had passed. The swirling winds and the gray curtain that had embroiled the Spire so far hadn't completely faded away, but the shrill howling of the wind had grown calmer. The clouds had become thin enough that one could see that dawn had broken as they fought.

The Morpho rose with that sky as its backdrop. Liquid metal spewed out from the exterior of its broken barrel, like cold vapor. The wind died down. Apparently, the wind up high was powerful. Little by little, the black clouds began swirling more slowly, dispersing as they lost the force that held them in place. The curtain of the clouds fell, exposing the blue skies as if dramatically marking the shifting of a scene.

A vivid azure sky shone through those clouds, lighting up the leaden sea.

But then those blue skies darkened.

"...?!"

As Raiden looked up, darkness settled over his field of vision, and he reflexively squeezed his eyes shut. That darkness was in fact a

bright, blinding light. It was bright enough to make optical screens momentarily go down from the overload—an amount of light radiation so vast, the support computer couldn't keep producing corrections.

An intense glare burned through the sky, its sheer brightness obscuring one's vision more intensely than darkness ever could. It moved at the literal speed of light and produced no sound. Following the terrifyingly long yet instantaneous flash of white darkness and silence, the light was gone. His optical screen flickered back to life and displayed his environment with corrections, but everything still seemed a bit darker than it was a moment ago.

The sky appeared as if the bright, summer sun was shining over it, like the filtered light of a daydream. But as he looked up at the azure sky in a daze, Raiden couldn't help but feel like something was terribly wrong.

The storm had blotted out the sky until just moment ago, but now that it had subsided, the fragmented firmament visible through the Spire's scaffolding felt darker than it should be... Yes, the scaffolding. The layered mesh that blocked his field of vision.

A mirage had settled over the top of this steel fortress. The entirety of Level Erze...had been burned to a crisp.

“...What—?”

And at the heart of Level Erze sat a crumbled mass, lacking the awe and menacing aura it had exuded not seconds ago.

“The Morpho... It's...” Someone gasped.

Its barrel had melted away like charred candy, and its ballistic responsive armor had fallen off and liquified so thoroughly that it couldn't activate anymore, exposing the armor plates beneath. The coating on it had evaporated, its once silver, metallic luster now a bleached white.

Since the metal that composed its body was thick, it hadn't completely melted over despite the intense heat. But lying between the beams that now looked like the planks of some dead, malformed tree, the Morpho was still. The light in its optical sensor blinked out, and its footing had visibly collapsed.

They couldn't hear its wailing anymore.

After a moment of stunned silence, the words finally left Raiden's lips.

“What...the hell was that...?”

It took only a moment... No more than a single moment...

In that one moment, the Morpho had been destroyed, crushed like an insect. The sight of it left Lena speechless.

“What...?” Ishmael gasped.

He shivered, as if he’d just witnessed some kind of mythical creature.

“Musukura...!”

His emerald eyes were fixed on the top of the screen, on the ocean in the distance where that blast of blinding light had come from. Lena looked at him questioningly, and he continued, though she couldn’t tell if he was answering her question or simply muttering to himself in shock.

“The largest species of leviathan out there... It uses that laser to shoot down fighter and bomber planes. Even the Legion can’t take a Musukura head-on. It’s a monster, no doubt about it.”

“A leviathan...did this?”

The rulers of the ocean, which reigned over the depths of the open seas, far beyond the reach of humanity. The species that had forbidden humankind from leaving the continent for thousands of years.

They were territorial creatures. Perhaps they even had the concept of a domain, because they abhorred the idea of anyone intruding on the area they reigned upon, the open seas. Any intruder was removed with lethal force, and all who approached were threatened away. Be they human or Legion.

This fortress was just barely outside the deep-blue open seas that were their territory. Neither the Spire nor the Orphan Fleet encroached on their domain, but there was intense combat taking place near the border. These moody creatures likely found it extremely disconcerting.

Ishmael gritted his teeth as he looked to the horizon they lurked in. The dragon-slaying Fleet Countries’ navy. True to their title of dragon slayers, they had made it their goal to govern the seas, but they had eventually failed to do so. The Open Sea clans suffered thousands of years of defeat, of anger and regret, which were now reflected in his glare.

“...To the very end, we could never beat them.”

“...”

“The sonar...still can’t spot it. But it’s close by. It came because it thought its territory was being intruded on. The storm’s gone... And the moment the fog cleared...”

Lena thought back to the middle of the mission. A heavy fog had settled over the sea. It was believed to be a secondary effect of the underwater volcano that served as the Mirage Spire’s energy source leaking heat onto the water.

But that wasn't the case. The Legion intentionally used the volcano to produce that fog, hiding behind it like a shield. Water could disperse that laser, and so long as that heavy fog hung over the Spire, the Musukura couldn't attack them.

Without that, nothing would stop the leviathans from attacking this Spire. It stood at the heart of the sea, visible from great distances, where a linear laser could shoot it from a distance. Without that fog, they could never maintain an artillery position in a place like this.

But with the storm subsiding, the blades of the wind blew the mist away...

"They...they were waiting for the storm to end, too."

As they stood planted in place, shocked by the unexpected sight before their eyes, a few moments of stupefied silence passed by. But Theo soon came to his senses, his face pale with dread.

"...Shin?!"

Undertaker... It was locked in melee combat with the Morpho and close to Level Erze at the moment the attack was fired. Where was Shin? Theo looked around the top floor, but there was no sign of the Reginleif's white form.

He felt his panic grow deeper. In cases where a comrade's survival was unclear, the Eighty-Six always checked the Sensory Resonance. The Para-RAID shared their senses, and should one side go unconscious or die, their Resonance would cut off. Seeing if someone was still connected would allow one to confirm if they were at least conscious, but Theo was too rattled to remember to check it.

In fact, he was so shaken up, it was almost strange.

"—If I hadn't come down from there, I'd have been caught up in the attack. That was close."

And that was why, when he heard that serene—if slightly shaken—voice through the Resonance, Theo sighed with relief. His tone almost sounded cheeky to Theo's nerve-racked mind. With heavy footsteps, Undertaker landed on Dora One, the floor Raiden and Theo were on.

The moment the laser had fired, he'd reflexively descended to Dora Two, and Laughing Fox happened to miss him.

"Come on, don't pull stunts like that... I thought my blood was gonna freeze solid..."

Despite his words of complaint, Theo was overcome with relief. By now, it felt like something that bordered on religious faith. It was fine. Shin wouldn't die like that. He wouldn't die like the captain did...

Lena informed him of the reason behind that beam of light via Para-RAID: a leviathan. An attack fired by the greatest species of leviathan, the Musukura.

“So that’s a leviathan...”

“That’s one hell of a monster... Is this thing for real...?”

It was their first time seeing that threat, and it had exceeded their every expectation. Even the Eighty-Six couldn’t help but be stricken with terror and awe. They turned their gazes, at once, to the waters that the beam of light had come from.

Beyond the horizon, at a distance the Juggernaut’s optical sensor—which couldn’t quite perceive the full force of the stars in the sky—couldn’t accurately see. There, an unknown, unseen *something* eyed them with malice. It was the something that was capable of shooting that burning beam across the sky.

Consciously breathing out, Shin regarded the wreckage of the Morpho above him with a glance. The burned surface was discolored, but the ocean breeze was already causing it to cool down. At this point, it was nothing more than a pile of scrap, the heat haze that hung over it now gone.

There was no voice. It was something he’d experienced enough times to grow used to it after seven years on the battlefield. The silence unique to a “dead” weapon.

Extracting its central processor is...probably going to be difficult when it’s this burned. Not much we can do about that, though.

“Railgun type: Morpho, confirmed silenced and downed. I hereby conclude that our primary objective is complete... Let’s get out of here.”

“You should hurry,” Yuuto whispered, his voice filled with unusual loathing. “We’re up against an animal here. We don’t know what might inspire it to attack again.”

Shin nodded.

But then...



<<Colare Two, lost. Colare One, fuselage heavily damaged.>>

<<Musukura fire confirmed. Threat level: maximal. Aforementioned light cannon approaching.>>

<<Defense of Operation Schwertwal deemed impossible. Plan Schwertwal: Initiation of self-preservation protocol advised.>>



...silver particles flaked off like snow, seeping from the center of the

Mirage Spire's celestial peak. They dripped down to the dark surface of the water. Like moonlight diffusing against a drizzle, like sand trickling down an hourglass.

Those were silver butterflies. A flock of Liquid Micromachines that made up a Legion's central processor, having splintered off from the whole. Just as the Phönix's processor would turn to butterflies each time it was driven to near destruction, these liquid silver figures now fluttered through the air.

Flocking together, their voice once again began to echo. *Heil dem Reich. Heil dem Reich.* Just before the laser hit them, they fled to the skies, hiding among the Eintagsfliege.

"The Morpho..."

Or rather, its central processor.

Shin's gaze jumped as the howl resumed and the butterflies folded their wings to attain dynamic lift. They plummeted through the stitches in the Mirage Spire's steel scaffolding like miniature comets. Their trajectory drawing a gentle helix due to the air resistance, they converged at the end of their downward spiral, melting together to form a singular argent droplet.

Like a water drop hitting the lake's surface, they left a splashing crown as they sank into the ocean.

The comet had plummeted down in under a second.

"It fell into the water. Did it crash...? No."

Right below them, at the bottom of the ocean the comet had fallen into, a rumbling howl began to rise. The other Processors who were connected to Shin via the Para-RAID could hear it through the Resonance.

The agonized thoughts of a mechanical ghost's final moments. Of someone who had died on a battlefield and been denied a grave, only to be taken away. The copy of their neural network had been assimilated by a Legion unit, which now shouted out their lingering regrets without pause.

A gigantic, metallic shadow rose from the depths. The sharp tips of two lances parted the water's surface. A large, elongated something, spanning thirty meters, pointing up to the zenith—directly to Dora Three, where the Juggernauts were situated.

The Liquid Micromachine silvery butterflies. The Morpho's central processor. The voice he heard as the thirty-meter long, dual-speared barrel climbed halfway up the Spire.

It was...

"All units, evacuate Level Dora! Get down, it's gonna shoot!"

And the next moment, *the railgun* howled.

The shell flew toward its target at a speed too great to perceive with the naked eye. The electrical discharge blitzed through the water like a fissure. Like a comet soaring upward, from the ocean up to the heavens, the diagonal shot pierced Level Dora.

An 800 mm caliber shell, its impressive mass traveling with an initial velocity of eight thousand meters per second. And there was nothing to curb that speed. It had fired at point-blank range, with none of its kinetic energy consumed. All the steel beams in the shot's way snapped like twigs, reduced to fragments as they left the fortress along with the shell. The beams supporting the walls lost most of their scaffolding, falling apart and plummeting down as well as they lost their fulcrums...descending like an avalanche on the Juggernauts, which escaped at the last second and dispersed down to Level Carla and farther down to Level Bertha.

“...!”

The Juggernauts curled up, hiding next to what pillars remained intact as they waited for the lethal avalanche to end. They heard the scaffolding plummet down with an ominous whistling of the wind before it splashed loudly into the ocean.

Anyone with leeway went down to Level Bertha. They scattered without regard for squadron or platoon, prioritizing getting as far as possible from one another to find cover. This was a judgment call that saved everyone present.

In a battlefield raining with explosives shells that had a wide blast radius, crowding together would only mean annihilation. In a battle where a moment's hesitation could mean the difference between life and death, questioning any warning, no matter how baffling, could result in fatal time loss. This was a lesson the Eighty-Sixth Sector had taught the Processors all too well.

At times of crisis, they knew to scatter, abide by warnings first, and ask questions later.

This unconscious habit ended up saving their lives.

Enemy units continued surfacing from the water. Thundering howls filled the Sensory Resonance, rattling Shin's skull.

And...



<<Colare One, recovery successful.>>

<<Loss of central processor—twenty-eight percent. No influence on combat performance.>>

<<Colare One, linking with Colare Synthesis successful.>>

<<Plan Schwertwal, integrated control circuit, booted up and on standby.>>

<<Plan Schwertwal: Commence.>>



...a warship's bladelike bow finally emerged from out of the waves. Its ascent was so rapid that it had burst out of the water diagonally, its hulking mass towering over the Juggernauts standing several dozen meters above ground level. The bottom of the hull had been exposed to the air, revealing countless folded legs. On both sides near the hull were four optical sensors, glinting blue as they observed the enemy.

A massive vessel that likely weighed over a thousand tonnes crashed down onto the water's surface with a thundering thud, raising a massive splashing pillar of water in its wake. It was twice the size of the *Stella Maris*. The armor of its deck and broadside glinted with a dull metallic sheen. The barrels of 40 mm antiaircraft revolving autocannons shone menacingly, situated on the center of the deck and broadside, with a few of them set on the vessel's stern.

On both sides of the ship were 155 mm rapid-fire railguns. The antiaircraft guns and the cannons were lying over one another in a staircase pattern, so as to secure each other's lines of fire.

And at the heart of this fortress built of countless cannons and guns lording over all like a castle keep were *a pair* of turrets. Thirty-meter-long spear-like barrels extended from both of them. A mass so large that even looking at it from above confused one's sense of perspective.

800 mm caliber railguns.

Two of them.

Perhaps to secure their respective lines of fire, the stern-side turret was set higher than the one on the bow, granting this unit's guns a nearly fifteen-meter height that exceeded the *Morpho*. The height from the ocean's surface to the deck was in fact shorter than the *Stella Maris's*, but the height to the top of the bridge far exceeded it.

Someone gasped. With terror. With shock.

"What...*is* that...?!"

"It can't be... *This whole ship is a Legion...?!'*"

As torrents of seawater spilled from the deck, silver threads extended from the railguns' turrets. Within seconds, they came to form wing veins, assuming the shape of butterfly wings. They began shining with a faint, phosphorescent aura as they flapped, as if to blot out the heavens.

Radiation cords deployed. The railguns were operational and combat ready.

And having shown off its full majesty, the dead spirit that possessed the massive warship's Liquid Micromachine central processor raised its voice in a battle cry. A newborn's shriek. A death throe.

Its every cannon and armament was equipped with a spear-shaped rail. Both their firepower and their range were greater than ordinary artillery.

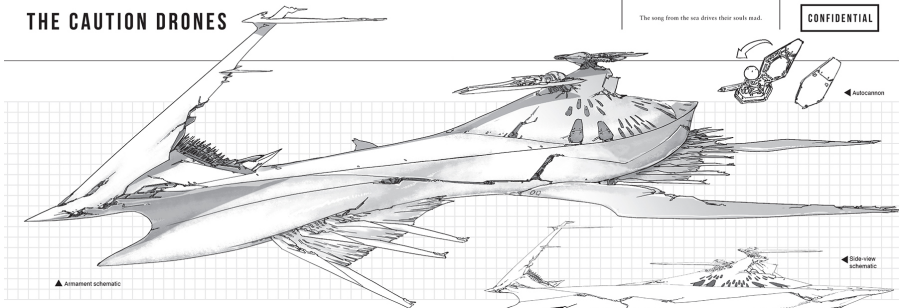
Even a single railgun could drive a small country to the brink of ruin. Just one had the firepower to bring the Fleet Countries to their knees.

And worst of all, they saw the bottom of its gigantic hull when it surfaced. This thing had *legs*. It didn't just swim. It could walk along the seafloor or on land. In other words, it was likely amphibious.

THE CAUTION DRONES

The wing from the sea drives their souls mad.

CONFIDENTIAL



[Electromagnetic Sunboat Type]

Noctiluca

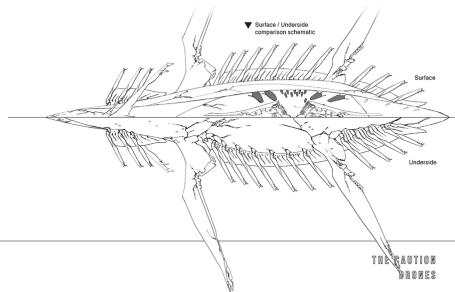
[ARMAMENTS]

Main Armaments: 800 mm Railgun [*2]
Secondary Armaments: 155 mm Rapid-Fire
Electromagnetic Railguns [*22]
40 mm Anti-Aircraft Revolving
Autocannons [*54]

[SPECS]

Total Length: over 300 m (estimated)
Fully Loaded Displacement: over 100,000
tonnes (estimated)
Engine: nuclear reactor (estimated)
Cruising/Sailing Speed: unknown

A top secret Legion weapon developed with the marine base as its cover. Loaded with two railguns, when only one was menacing enough to single-handedly break down the Federacy's front lines. While naturally capable of sailing across large bodies of water, it also has multiple legs, and it's assumed to be capable of cruising along land as well. Unlike normal ships, it lacks spaces that would normally be occupied by essential crew members. It is estimated that it uses this space for extra armor and ammunition depots. It is undoubtedly the largest, most terrible offensive Legion type on record.
It cannot be allowed to escape. It must be sunk.



N O C T I L U C A

[mechanical design] I-IV

THE CAUTION
DRONES

It might struggle to operate properly on land, but if it could encroach as far as the shores... That alone was dangerous enough.

“Stella Maris to all units. I hereby designate this new threat the Electromagnetic Gunboat type: Noctiluca.”

This ocean was the territory of the Open Sea clans. Even if this operation would take away the Orphan Fleet’s and the clans’ pride, these were still their waters. These useless pieces of scrap metal had no right to swim through them like they owned the place.

“It is to be treated as a sentient being. We will sink it here and now!”

Suddenly, one more target was added to his Resonance.

“—Your Highness!”

One of Vika’s eyes twitched. Zashya. His lieutenant, whom he’d left behind to handle land combat. Unlike her usual bumbling demeanor, when she was on the battlefield, she proved to be quite talented... And she had decided to contact him at a time like this.

“It’s out, is it?”

“Yes. The Legion’s ground units are beginning their offensive, and we’ve confirmed the enemy’s gotten reinforcements.”

She then paused for a second, her voice thick with horror.

“The Phönix... They’ve mass-produced the Phönix...”



A rain of fire engulfed the Fleet Countries’ boggy battleground. The artillery Juggernauts that stayed behind to reinforce the defensive line with mobile defense pelted the battlefield with 88 mm incendiary bombs.

This wasn’t ordinary ammunition, be it for a tank turret or a gun. Napalm fire was considered largely ineffective against armored weapons. This applied for drones like the Legion as well. Despite that, firebombs kept falling down like rain, spreading fire about the battlefield.

The Eintagsfliege’s brittle wings were weak to flames. They ignited easily, losing their capacity to deflect light rays, revealing the units they hid.

And so they showed themselves, shaking the silver, snow-like flakes off them. Nimble limbs that invoked the image of a feline. Silver armor that intersected like a bird’s wings. A pair of high-frequency blades extending from their backs, like a lizard’s spikes.

They revealed themselves, one after another, each of them

assuming that detestable form.

“It’s just like Lena said,” admitted Michihi.

“Yeah. ‘They might introduce a mass-produced High Mobility type’... I didn’t think it’d actually be true,” Rito replied.

They were both on the same defensive line, but they were each taking cover in different pillboxes and communicating via the Para-RAID.

The mass-produced model’s fuselage was a bit larger than the one they saw before. It retained the liquid armor it had in the United Kingdom but still didn’t have any firearms to speak of. Its only fixed armaments were the multijointed, highly flexible arms and the high-frequency blades at their tips. Apparently, the chain blade had been omitted, as controlling it was apparently too complicated...

It seemed the Legion decided that any overly complicated features were unnecessary for the mass-produced models. Or maybe there was another reason. The chain blade was meant to swiftly destroy opponents during surprise attacks. But just like firearms, that was deemed to be *incompatible with the mass-produced models’ purpose*.

“And Lena was right about something else. Its objective really is *headhunting*, from the looks of it... Though I don’t know how she could figure that out without seeing it.”

Rito couldn’t help but groan. Headhunting. By taking in the brain structures of the war dead, the Legion broke the chains of their programmed life span and improved their features. Headhunting was when the Legion hunted down humans to gain more efficient central processors. It was a common occurrence in the Federacy, the United Kingdom, and most markedly in the Eighty-Sixth Sector. An act of brutality by the mechanical ghosts.

Behind the ranks of the Phönix stood rows of Tausendfüßler—Recovery Transport types. This type of Legion rarely appeared on the front lines. But since the Phönix lacked a manipulator, the Tausendfüßler were likely present to pick up the heads they left in their wake or drag away anyone they captured alive.

Brain tissue was exceptionally easy to damage, and depending on the temperature, it could decay to the point of being unusable in as little as half a day. As such, the Legion needed to recover bodies quickly.

Rito furrowed his brow unpleasantly.

“...I guess we didn’t give her enough credit.”

Firebombs were an unconventional weapon, both for howitzers and Feldreß. Their flames rapidly tore off the Phönix’s optical camouflage. The fact that they were able to rain such an unconventional weapon on the Legion was because they were prepared for this. Their queen had suspected the possibility of a mass-

produced Phönix being introduced and had prepared the battlefield with measures to deal with it. Rito didn't imagine they would burn off the butterflies that hid them that easily.

"...All right, then."

"They're coming."

The Phönix bent their bodies, like a flock of bizarre animals, and lunged forward in the next moment. As if to meet their challenge, the Reginleifs the two of them led descended upon the burning battlefield.



In the distance, a familiar scene unfolded. As the glow of optical sensors illuminated the mothership's enormous gun barrel, several units charged toward the floating fortress.



Shin realized it at once. It didn't appear on the radar and even fooled the optical sensor. But his ability had always heard the ghosts' incessant wailing, warning him of their appearance and position.

"All units, be on guard! Hostiles approaching with optical camouflage! They're likely Phönix units!"

With the gentle flapping of butterfly wings and refraction of light, something climbed up the outer walls of the Spire. Like a bird of prey swooping up to catch their mark, they vertically raced up the scaffolding. The external panels smashed and fell over, as if marking their trajectory. There were four of them in number.

The Juggernauts along their presumed trajectory turned around, opening fire as soon as they passed. Their 88 mm tank turrets smashed through the panels, followed by barrages of machine-gun and buckshot-cannon fire.

Theo didn't help intercept them. By the time he heard the warning, the shadows had already reached as high as Level Carla. The Juggernauts previously used their wire anchors to evacuate down to Level Bertha, and now that choice worked against them. As impressive as the enemy's mobility might have been, they were still sprinting vertically in defiance of gravity. Trying to evade at a time like this would be difficult.

The barrages successfully gunned down three Phönix, but one had broken through. The one that got away left the Juggernauts behind, sprinting farther up. Its aim was...

"Shin again? These things have the biggest crush on you, man!" Raiden remarked.

“I don’t think I’d be a good match for anyone *that* clingy!” Shin quipped back.

Even as they joked, Undertaker and Wehrwolf were on guard. They were on Carla Three, which was currently the highest floor of the Spire, preparing to bombard the enemy as soon as it passed.

The enemy was still invisible, but the wailings told Shin where it was. He hopped away to dodge. Even a Reginleif couldn’t immediately jump up again, and as Undertaker tried to reel itself farther up to the ceiling, it approached him...

However.

“...You really thought we wouldn’t predict that?”

Some 88 mm canister shells soared up above him, bursting and unleashing a buckshot that rained down on the fortress. As soon as she’d heard Shin announce the Phönix’s arrival and received Vika’s report, Lena had the artillery unit fire a barrage.

Yes, from the start, Lena had included the artillery unit specifically as a countermeasure for the Phönix. The leviathan’s and the Morpho’s bombardment had blown off most of the roof above them, allowing the rain of metal to shower down on the room unimpeded and tear through the Eintagsfliege’s camouflage.

The silver shards crumbled away, revealing the rippling silver armor underneath. The moment it became visible, Wehrwolf bombarded it from the flank, tearing into it and the Eintagsfliege with 40 mm autocannon shells.

The silvery shadow came undone, revealing the nimble form of an animal. Liquid armor like the plumage of a bird, and a pair of high-frequency blades like a lizard’s spikes or a bat’s wings. Right now, it was helplessly being mowed down by the autocannon fire, but...

...It really is a Phönix.

However, another silver beast was crouched behind it, letting out an artificial howl unlike anything Shin had heard before. It rose to its feet, its optical sensor shining like an azure flame.

“What...?!”

As one unintelligible mechanical howl trickled out, another unit appeared behind it. Shin couldn’t detect Legion that were in a state of stasis until they reactivated.

The Phönix’s winglike back-mounted blades screeched as they swung through the air with incandescent heat. Using the first unit to shield itself from the autocannon’s shells, the second unit lunged forward, utilizing its fallen consort for footing.

Expecting Raiden’s covering fire, Undertaker moved in pursuit of the target, but it couldn’t avoid collision. Bone-like ivory and flowing, liquid silver clashed. Two armored weapons met in frontal collision.

As this lethal exchange took place, Theo looked up from Level Bertha. The moment they intersected, Shin twisted Undertaker's body, protecting his cockpit block from the Phönix's blade while driving his own high-frequency blade into it.

This didn't dampen his inertia, though. The force of the collision blew Undertaker away. The Phönix grappled with Undertaker, which still had its blade driven into it. Sooner than Undertaker could purge the blade, the liquid armor self-destructed in close range, sending Undertaker plummeting out of the fortress.

It was like an act of revenge—a vicious reversal of how Undertaker slew the original Phönix by knocking it down into a lava pool in the Dragon Fang Mountain base.

Undertaker's snapped high-frequency blade let out a shrill buzz as it flew through the air.

“...!”

Even still, Undertaker barely managed to kick away the Phönix—or rather, its remains—and fired both its anchors to the left and right, coiling them through the broken external panels and around the scaffolding.

But then, right below them, the Noctiluca's bow-side railgun fired. An 800 mm shell just barely skimmed one of Level Carla's pillars before flying off into the distance. But that single brush of the shell shook the scaffolding like a tremor. The wire missed, leaving Undertaker to fall powerlessly down, as if echoing the way the Phönix plummeted into that lava pit.

The tremor caused it to miss its shot, and it fell, following a shower of steel beams and shattered panels...

“Shin...”

The Personal Mark of the headless skeleton carrying a shovel sank all too quickly into the depths.

The Para-RAID cut off. Just like it did when those connected to the Resonance went unconscious...or died. The incessant screams of the Legion, which were always mixed into the Resonance whenever Shin was connected, also ceased—leaving a cruel, thundering silence in their absence.

CHAPTER 5

THE TOWER (REVERSE)

“...Ah.”

For a moment, Theo was speechless. What just happened? Some part of him had to know. Laughing Fox looked up at Undertaker as it all took place, so it had seen everything that transpired.

“...Shin.”

No response came. The Para-RAID had been shut off. Just like back then. When they abandoned the captain to his death. It was the same silence that lingered after he'd cut off the radio.

He'd forgotten. The captain... The captain who, despite being an Alba, returned to the battlefield of his own volition. Leaving behind a beloved wife and a newborn child. Who had people who would grieve his passing. A man who had a future ahead of him, joy he could claim if he'd only lived on...

And despite all that, he died. Leaving nothing behind but the Personal Mark of a laughing fox. And in his place, Theo survived... Theo, who didn't have a future or anyone to share it with. No one to grieve his passing. He had neither a family nor a home to return to. That didn't mean he wanted to die, but...he did think that if only one of them had to survive, it should have been the captain.

And Shin was the same. He'd finally found someone to share his life with. A happy future to aspire toward. And he had comrades who all wished for him to grasp that joy.

Theo had been left behind again. Still unable to wish for anything.

It was like he'd forgotten so far. And now he'd remembered, all too vividly. It didn't matter how much one's life was worth. The number of people one left behind, the sheer volume of tears that would be shed by their passing... None of that mattered. A life could

be reaped away without regard for any of that.

If anything, it seemed that those who had more to live for—those who would be mourned the most—were always the first to go.

Such was the way of the world.

“Ah...”

The sight of it froze Lena in place, too. Undertaker crashed down, scattering tiny shards as it did. She could see him fall in slow motion, but it only took a single moment before it ended. It crashed into the sea, raising a pillar of splashing water in its wake. And just like that, it powerlessly sank into the shadowy depths.

“Aah... Aaaah...”

She could hear, as if from a distance, the sound of Frederica’s chair falling and retreating footsteps as the girl jumped to her feet. She could hear her intentionally sprint in a panic, and in between her steps, she shouted, “Send a rescue boat! My power can see the ones who fall, so hurry and save him! Quickly!”

But even as she heard her, Lena couldn’t move. Undertaker... Shin had fallen. But he was fine. He had to be. She had to believe it. He’d fallen from quite the significant height, but he did fall into the water. The Reginleif was built for fighting at high speeds, and it was equipped with powerful shock absorbers. What’s more, Undertaker fired its wire anchor midfall, momentarily coiling around a beam. That should have curbed its falling speed and allowed it to correct its posture. He didn’t fall headfirst, so he was fine. He had to be.

The Stella Maris had deployed rescue boats around the Spire ahead of time, accounting for the possibility of someone falling. Small boats meant for retrieving fighter planes that crashed before returning to their carrier. The Juggernaut was even lighter than that, so collecting it shouldn’t have been a tall order.

But would the water really have softened his landing that much? And didn’t his wire miss before it could reduce his fall speed? As powerful as the shock absorbers might have been, they couldn’t completely nullify the impact. And before accounting for all that, wouldn’t the Phönix’s self-destruction damage Undertaker?

And most importantly, if he was fine, then why? Why wouldn’t the Para-RAID connect to him? Lena was right there, so why didn’t he reach out to her for rescue...?!

“No...!”

Shin said he’d return. On that snowy battlefield, they promised each other they would return alive, together. He’d told her he wanted to live alongside her. The conversation they had right before this operation surfaced in her mind. That time, it was Shin who stole a

kiss. A biting, sulking...yet sweet kiss.

The words he'd told her.

Whenever you're ready to give me your answer...just let me know.

Lena still hadn't answered him. She still hadn't returned the feelings she should have expressed eons ago. And despite that...

Feeling all the power drain from her limbs, Lena sunk to the floor. Her blood pressure dropped, as if she'd suddenly been overcome with anemia. A thick white fog clouded her field of vision.

She was a commander on the ship's bridge, in front of both her subordinates and another country's soldiers. The stray thought that she ought to have kept up her appearances as Bloody Reina, something akin to pride, crossed her mind.

But all that felt distant right now. Her knees couldn't support her weight. She'd spent her entire life standing on two feet, but right now, the memory of how to do it eluded both her mind and body. Her slender form wavered. Marcel rose to his feet, sensing danger.

But then a voice she hadn't heard in what felt like forever boomed through the Resonance.

“Pull yourself together, Your Majesty!”

Lena snapped to her senses. It was as if that call had slapped her across the face. She somehow managed to get strength in her legs. That voice...

“Shiden...,” Lena muttered wearily to herself, as if she'd just been shaken out of a dream.

Shiden sighed in relief upon hearing this. Since the Resonance communicated noises as they occurred to each of their respective senses, the synchronization rate was preset to its minimal setting. But even at minimal Resonance, emotions were expressed as if they were facing each other directly, and Lena could feel the strained unease and panic Shiden was only barely able to suppress.

Whenever she faced Shin, the two of them would always fight. It felt like the two of them were incompatible on the most fundamental level of their personalities. But Shiden did acknowledge Shin in her own way, so she was worried about him.

“He'll be fine. He said he'd come back to ya, didn't he? Then it's your job to believe in him. He'll make it. He survived the Special Reconnaissance mission, didn't he?”

Lena gasped. The Eighty-Sixth Sector's battlefield of certain death. The final disposal site of the Eighty-Six who'd outlived their period of service, like the eastern front's first defensive unit, the Spearhead squadron. The death march through enemy territory. A mission with a survival rate of 0 percent. And despite it being their final good-bye,

they'd managed to cheat death.

"You know this already. We Eighty-Six, we're stubborn and cling to life, no matter how underhanded the means we have to resort to are. They fed us to the Eighty-Sixth Sector and told us to die, yet here we are. And he's the strongest out of all of us. Ain't no way in hell he's not the most stubborn of the bunch, too."

There's no way he isn't coming back from this.

Lena nodded desperately. She nodded again and again.

"You're right. You're absolutely right..."

She fixed her posture and raised her head. Marcel watched her with concern in his eyes, and from where Lena stood, she could see Ishmael, averting his gaze to spare her from being seen in this shameful moment. Lena nodded at him and raised her voice.

"Vanadis to all units! Command over the Spearhead squadron is relegated to Raiden. The operation's objective will be changed."

The Federacy uniform flapped as she moved, and she clenched her fists without regarding it.

"The Strike Package's mission is to remove the threat of the Legion from the Fleet Countries' shores. The new Legion type that appeared, the Noctiluca, is a threat that must be eliminated. If this unit's long-distance cannons are allowed to move freely through the sea, it would put not just the Fleet Countries but all other countries in danger. As such..."

She glared at the massive shadow displayed on her monitor.

"...our new top-priority objective is the elimination of the Noctiluca. Direct all your efforts to annihilating the target!"

The appearance of an enemy vessel, with two railguns as its main armaments at that, was incredibly shocking for the Orphan Fleet's crew. But compared with the Eighty-Six, who were the subject of a surprise attack by an 800 mm shell and lost their operations commander, they were much calmer.

Another factor that contributed to them remaining collected was that as part of their initial objective, they had formed a circular perimeter around the Mirage Spire, preparing to resume bombardment of the Morpho.

"Stella Maris to all vessels! Our target is the Noctiluca. Open fire as soon as you realign your sights!"

That was why, when it came to naval combat, the Orphan Fleet were the ones to shoot first. Two long-distance cruisers fixed their guns on the target, and the supercarrier fixed four of its own guns. In other words, its main turrets, a pair of 40 cm gun mounts, roared as it billowed fire. Shells that each weighed one tonne cut through the

ocean breeze as they rushed toward the Noctiluca.

However, the Orphan Fleet's guns were normally meant for firing and scattering depth charges across long distances. They were now launching them above the sea, where they were less effective, in addition to their guns not being accurate against moving targets. Guided weapons were expensive, and the Fleet Countries had very few of them, and so their shells only landed exactly on the spot they were fired toward.

The Noctiluca, however, was far faster than one might imagine such a massive vessel to be. With the unnatural agility and speed characteristic of the Legion, it swiftly changed bearings, moving about the ocean with lightning speed and using the time lag that the 40 cm shells took to reach it to deftly avoid them.

The ship turned, the two pairs of wings on its main turrets spread out as the blue optical sensors on its bow glinted as they glared at the Stella Maris. It wasn't a second later that the two 800 mm railguns swiveled to aim at the enemy vessel.

Supercarriers were never built in anticipation of open naval combat between itself and another vessel, and it wasn't capable of avoiding shots from an enemy gun with such a wide rotation radius.

"We won't let you...!"

But just then, the Denebola finished shooting and began moving at max speed toward the Noctiluca, preparing to ram its flank. A ramming maneuver akin to the oar ships of old.

The Denebola's bow was crashed against the Noctiluca's heavily armored broadside. Sparks flew, and the long-distance cruiser's hull let out a metallic screech as it sidled up to the Noctiluca and fired all its mooring wires. As the anchor at their ends dug into the Electromagnetic Gunship type, the Denebola's motor roared as it began moving in reverse. It was trying to tow away the Noctiluca—which weighed in at over a hundred thousand tonnes—with all its propulsion.

"Stella Maris, Brother! While you have time, you—"

Ishmael would never hear the end of that sentence. The two railguns turned to the Denebola. Crackling electricity ran between one set of rails, and then...fire.

The thundering blast of the cannon at close range was so intense that it came across as silence instead of noise. The Denebola's bridge took a direct hit and was completely blown away. The intense sound of that explosion eclipsed all other sounds on the battlefield.

And yet the Denebola kept moving. Its engine was still running, driving the ship in reverse course, fiercely towing the Noctiluca away.

Of course, it was more than double the Denebola's weight, so the ship couldn't turn it away. But the sheer force of its movement did stall the massive vessel...exposing its sensitive left flank to the three other remaining ships.

The Denebola's positioning placed the Noctiluca in an unfavorable position. Since it was a massive vessel that dwarfed even the Stella Maris, standing directly to its right made it so its railguns, even at their lowest angle of depression, could only aim at the bridge. A ship's engine was coupled with its propellers, placing it at the hull's bottom—underwater. The Denebola being at point-blank range effectively sealed away the Noctiluca's strongest armaments, making it an impediment it couldn't easily shake off or eliminate.

All that was calculated at the moment the Denebola rammed it. The moment before the bridge was blown off, the Denebola's captain could be heard over the radio.

“Glory to the Orphan Fleet...!”

Those words weren't directed at anyone in particular. Those were simply the captain's choice of final words. He could have voiced a grudge or a regret, and no one would judge him for it. But instead, he praised his country, his homeland—the history that led up to him being who he was.

That courage made Ishmael grit his teeth. This was an operation they had to accomplish—even if it meant losing the entirety of their navy, even if the Orphan Fleet had to be wiped out to do it.

Swallowing all the pain and indignation, he raised his head.

“Continue the bombardment! We have it pinned down. Next time, we hit it! Knock it down to the bottom of the ocean!”

“Artillery squadron, prepare to fire! Load up incendiary bombs! We have to disable the enemy's optical camouflage first!”

At Lena's order, lines of fire were launched from the Stella Maris's deck. The blue sky, which had only just brightened with the passage of the storm, turned dark again as missiles rushed at the Noctiluca. The incendiary bombs soon reached the top of the Noctiluca, spraying and igniting the napalm they contained. An intense bombardment that didn't shy away from overheating the barrel brought a shower of dark flames to bear upon the metallic battleship.

The flames danced upon the armored deck, spreading up to the fortresslike gun turrets, slithering between the railguns' barrels. Metallic wings caught fire, turning to silver-gray ash that the wind scattered over the sea. This exposed a group of argent, undulating shadows.

Lena gazed at it, her eyes narrowed. Enemy detected. It really was them.

She'd predicted before this operation began that the Legion might intend to mass-produce it and that this might be the time they chose to introduce them. That was why she made sure to add incendiary bombs to their arsenal and increased the number of Juggernauts with armaments that would better counter them.

The sudden worsening of the war situation for the Fleet Countries and the other surrounding nations. The Legion's change in strategy following the failure of the large-scale offensive. The rise in their numbers and increased performance.

When Vika saw the Phönix in the Revich Citadel Base, he wondered what the unit was made for. Sword-touting heroes, racing through the battlefield like one-man armies, were ineffective in modern warfare. That held true for humankind, but that idea was all the more worthless for the Legion.

But the Legion changed their tactics. Their numbers rose, and their performance increased. They destroyed the Republic, taking its citizens as spoils of war. They exchanged the Black Sheep, created with the damaged neural networks of the war dead, for the Sheepdogs, which retained their intellect but removed the personality and memories.

They had gathered plenty of heads to use for their ordinary soldiers. So natural progression indicated that their next step would be gathering the heads of the elite.

Modern warfare had no place for heroes.

But the Legion were different. They needed "heroes." Their change in strategy necessitated it. And so they made it. One who would seek out the shining star among the brittle humans, an inefficient yet powerful hero's head. They made a unit that would act as a hero to hunt the heads of heroes.

A unit that would overwhelm even the most skilled of human soldiers but would not harm their remains—their brains—with the force of artillery. A melee, bladed soldier. An idea discarded by modern warfare.

"To hunt heads, for the sake of expanding the Legion's performance. To do that, they would have to mass-produce the Phönix."

And despite having predicted it...

Being Resonated with Shin and hearing the countless wailings had put a strain on Vika, too, and that was exceptionally hard in the Noctiluca's case, as its screams *were* a bloodcurdling mixture of

multiple brains. Ironically enough, with Shin disconnected and the screams gone, Vika finally realized he could make out some portion of what the screams were trying to convey.

At first, he thought it was just wailing. But now he realized that some of what it said formed meaningful words. Those were words he'd heard in a ritual once when he was little, before the Legion War started.

Those words weren't in the primary language of the continent's west. Between the Federacy and the countries of the continent's east spanned a hammada desert, its trade routes governed by the Rin-Liu Trade Federation. That ritual and the Legion's wailings were in the language of that country and its surrounding nations and tribes.

The officers of those countries spoke those words, offering them up as prayer to their deity of war—a war goddess.

Vika narrowed his Imperial violet eyes in thought.

“So one of them was an eastern general... I see. The Legion aim to improve their features...”

The Sheepdogs were based on Republic citizens who never knew war and had no knowledge of battle, and so they sought to optimize them. The Eighty-Six had no knowledge of strategy, and so they sought to improve the Shepherds into more efficient commander units with superior command skills.

And to do so, the Legion would intentionally seek out soldiers. Highly educated, rigorously trained, high-ranking commanders—the kind that were protected and rarely found on the front lines. And so they chose small countries, where the defensive lines were easier to breach, as their hunting grounds. Once they'd broken through, they could collect the heads of high-ranking officers who gave commands from the home front.

Like, for example, the Fleet Countries. Nations that requested that the Strike Package deploy there. The Federacy and the United Kingdom couldn't know this because of the Eintagsfliege's electronic interference, but several countries had likely already been wiped out by the Legion.

The disturbing screaming of the Noctiluca, the final cries of dozens of people—that was probably the result of many neural networks fused together. This was likely a Shepherd that couldn't function as a commander and had the brain structures of generals and field officers appended to it after the fact.

“...How troublesome.”

The Stella Maris entered artillery battle with the Noctiluca, forcing it into evasive maneuvers until the Denebola rammed it. As a result, it

had moved away from the Mirage Spire, leaving the marine fortress the Reginleifs had infiltrated behind.

Their tank turrets could reach the Noctiluca, but it had gotten far enough that they couldn't hope to jump over to it. Meanwhile, the Phönix units aboard the Noctiluca's deck shook the ash of the Eintagsfliege off themselves and began climbing up to their mother ship's turrets in groups. They ascended to the top of the ship, dozens of meters above sea level, and plunged off, grabbing onto the outer walls of the Spire and gaining height with devilish speed.

Raiden overlooked the scene from the current top level of the Spire, Carla Three. Leaving the naval battle to their mother ship, it seemed the Phönix units decided to stage a landing. Their goal was to retake the fortress. Or perhaps headhunting, as Lena predicted.

Either way, it didn't matter.

“—Yuuto! We'll handle beating back the Phönix here. Lend me your troops on Level Carla!”

This was right after they had all scattered to take cover, without regard for squadron or platoon, across six different floors. They didn't have time for everyone to regroup to their respective units.

Sitting inside his unit, Verethragna, in Level Bertha, Yuuto regarded him with a glance and a curt nod. Exchanging members between their units wasn't out of the usual for either of them.

In the Eighty-Sixth Sector, anyone could die at any time, and so units had to be reorganized and rebalanced. As commanders or vice commanders, they were often required to account for those changes.

“Go ahead. All units on Level Bertha, you are hereby under my command. Fire-restriction and area-suppression units, stay wary of the Phönix and cover for the vanguards equipped with tank turrets and snipers. Vanguards and snipers, focus on taking out the Noctiluca's turrets. We'll be supporting the Orphan Fleet's battle.”

With the Noctiluca fixed in place by the Denebola, the Stella Maris and the remaining two long-distance cruisers continued bombarding it. They rotated their turrets so as to not strike their consort units or the Mirage Spire and resumed their shooting.

As low as their accuracy was, they would still hit a straight shot against an immobile target. Their 40 mm shells flocked the Noctiluca in a linear course.

Only for all of them to be effectively deflected.

“What...?!”

“It's so bulky...!”

Its armor was thick. Since it didn't need to account for the extra

load that came with having crew members, the Legion could invest all its weight into thick armor. And since the Orphan Fleet's ships had to remain wary of the railguns' rapid fire, they had to keep their distance. This meant their shots lacked the punch to penetrate its armor.

The Basilicus turned rudder to shoot from up close, but it was then that the Noctiluca fired back. The massive ship had its portside, with eleven of its 155 mm rapid-fire guns, turned toward the Orphan Fleet. The guns began spewing fire.

True, it had its weakest point, its bow, exposed to its enemies. But this also meant many of its guns were now facing the enemy fleet, allowing it to exhibit maximal firepower. A thick, quick barrage of bullets flew through the air, shot faster than artillery could ever hope to be. This forced the Basilicus to turn rudder in a hurry and flee.

Much like its main armaments, the rapid-fire guns were railguns. They couldn't approach it like this.

Watching over the fighting from Level Bertha, Theo gritted his teeth.

He was now under Yuuto's command. The Noctiluca was the only enemy craft on the water, and it was fixed in place. But the battle between the Noctiluca and the Orphan Fleet was too one-sided. It was like a pack of rats trying to hunt down a tiger.

It had more guns than all the remaining ships the Orphan Fleet had put together and was capable of firing at them rapidly with its railguns. With twenty-two 155 mm rapid-fire guns and two 800 mm turrets working in tandem, it could launch a nightmarish, incessant barrage.

Theo's group was deployed on the Mirage Spire's Level Bertha, where the Juggernauts equipped with 88 mm turrets took aim at the rapid-fire guns. They attempted to shoot at them repeatedly, but the vessel was also equipped with over fifty 40 mm antiaircraft guns.

Under that barrage, aiming at the Morpho was hard, and keeping it pinned in place was even harder. And those anti-air guns were set there to defend the two main railguns and the 155 mm rapid-fire guns.

No matter what direction they aimed at the rapid-fire guns from, they would always be in the cross fire of the antiaircraft guns. The occasional shot managed to get to the rapid-fire guns, but the armor plates set to defend them were too thick. They couldn't penetrate them from this distance.

If there was one way to decisively remove them...

"We have to get closer. We have to board the ship."

The Noctiluca was slightly outside the range a Reginleif would be

able to jump across. They couldn't leap to it. Looking around, Theo searched for something they could use.

There.

"Laughing Fox to all units. I'm boarding the enemy! Cover me!"

He thrust his unit's control sticks forward. Laughing Fox sprung like an arrow. Instead of jumping down the floors, he jumped to the exterior of the Spire, using his three-dimensional movement to travel even faster. He fired his anchor forward to stabilize his unit, moving vertically down the tower.

A transmission from Raiden soon blew into his ear.

"Don't be crazy, Theo! You're letting panic get the better of you!"

"It's fine. I'm not panicking."

That was a lie. He was terrified, and he knew it. He couldn't deny the lump of emotion smoldering in his heart, overwhelming him and taking away his reasoning.

Shin should have found his salvation. He could see his future... He could have been happy, and he was lost.

Mercilessly. All too easily. All too quickly. This was the only kind of equality that really existed. And if that was the case...

We who can't be saved are probably going to get consumed all the more mercilessly. We really will die.

"But...I can't not do anything crazy here."

If he was to contain the desire to scream out the smoldering lump in his heart, he had to do this.

He kept sprinting down until he spotted what looked like a jumping board, positioned diagonally over the sea. It was likely some kind of scaffolding that had been bent down the middle by the falling beams.

"Go...!"

He landed on it precisely and, without breaking his momentum, sprinted to the edge and jumped off the tip.

"Artillery squadron, switch ammunition to antipersonnel buckshot. Fire as soon as you've loaded!"

Seeing Laughing Fox's plunge, Lena immediately gave that order. Much like the incendiary bombs, she brought this ammo to counter the optical camouflage. This couldn't help penetrate the Noctiluca's deck, which could even withstand bombardment, but the flames could blind its sensors.

Theo couldn't dodge midjump, and so she gave that order to ensure he wouldn't be shot down. In the distance, the Noctiluca was covered by a blooming cloud of flames and smoke. It would take a

moment for the blast's sound to reach them, though.

“Continue firing! Keep up the barrage until further orders!”

Both Theo's shout that he would board the enemy and Lena's orders to cover for him reached Kurena through the Resonance. She was still standing frozen in place on Level Carla, where she'd evacuated to escape the railgun's bombardment. Some part of her mind remarked that she should be helping cover for him, but she couldn't move.

Her vision was dazed and unfocused. The head-mounted display followed her eye movements, the reticle swirling in place. Watching it was headache-inducing. Her right hand was shaking, and she couldn't bring herself to clench it. She couldn't even feel the control stick it was holding.

After all...Shin had fallen. The one person whom she thought would never leave her. Just like the many comrades she'd met before and since meeting him. Just like Kaie and Haruto and Kujo and Kino did two years ago in the Eighty-Sixth Sector. Just like her parents, who were beaten to death by soldiers as part of a joke... Just like her sister, whom she loved more than anything but who never came back.

Shin alone was the only one who would always return. The only one who'd never leave her side. The only one who wouldn't abandon her...!

“No...no, don't...don't leave me...!”

She stood stock-still. Her muscles wouldn't budge, and all her thoughts drew blanks. She couldn't move. But her hands alone wouldn't stop shaking, and her eyes kept wandering, refusing to fixate on anything. She felt like she couldn't hit even a single shell if she tried.

Because being next to him was the only place she belonged. She had nothing else. Even if she were to lose her pride, they would still be comrades. That wouldn't change. And just that would be enough to keep her going.

Something ran up to Gunslinger. An ivory-white shadow, like polished bone. A prowling, skeletal spider creeping across the battlefield in search of its lost head. A Reginleif.

...Seeking its lost head. Seeking his brother's stolen head. But she wouldn't be able to wander the battlefield in search of it all alone like he could... She wouldn't be able to find Shin's lost whereabouts.

The Reginleif's red optical sensor turned to face her. Red, just like a certain someone's eyes. It had the Personal Mark of a scaled, winged maiden. Melusine, Shana's rig. Apparently, the Brísingamen squadron saw that they didn't have enough hands on deck to handle the Phönix and joined them on Level Carla.

She could hear Shana's cool voice connect to the Resonance and speak to her.

"Kurena, what are you doing? We need to cover for—"

But just as she spoke, Shana realized why Kurena wasn't doing anything. She didn't even make an effort to hide her irritation, clicking her tongue and leaving only one remark through the Resonance.

"If you're not going to shoot, get down from here. You're in the way."

Those words hit her stronger than anything else. Yes, that was right.

She was being useless.

Laughing Fox's ten-tonne weight drew an arc as it soared past the blue abyss. Upon reaching the zenith of his jump, it began falling in midair with nothing beneath it. It was just shy of reaching the Noctiluca's deck.

Theo fired a wire anchor, which coiled around a radar mast, and reeled it back to compensate for the distance he didn't have. Noticing his reckless charge, the anti-aircraft guns fixed their sights on him. But the moment their line of fire turned to him, shells flew in and burst one after another. Their flames and shock waves obfuscated the line of fire, hiding Laughing Fox from the Noctiluca.

Theo retrieved the wire anchor he'd coiled around the enemy vessel, then fired another anchor in the opposite direction. It fixed itself into the ship's broadside as the other anchor noisily returned to its launcher. The recoil as well as gravity yanked Laughing Fox out of the anti-aircraft guns' range.

The fixed wire kept him hanging as he moved downward over the water. Reeling his wire back, he climbed up and hopped down to the Noctiluca's deck.

The anti-aircraft guns fired in pursuit of Laughing Fox, their bullets gouging into the deck. Laughing Fox evaded their shots, hiding behind a pile of beams lying on the deck—likely pieces of the Spire's scaffolding.

I guess the Morpho wasn't keen on shooting down the floors because this thing was right beneath us.

Soon after, others followed his lead, using their anchors to board the ship. Lerche's Chaika, Yuuto's Verethragna, and the surviving Alkonosts. The antipersonnel buckshot formed smoke screens that hid them from the anti-aircraft guns, and they soon took cover in the same spots as him.

Theo could see the beams they were using as a sprung weight

bend under their load and roll away loudly. Chaika, who was hiding closest to Laughing Fox, sent a reproachful look in his direction.

“You shouldn’t go on such reckless ventures, Sir Fox...! Leave this kind of foolhardiness to Sir Reaper, if you will!”

“Keep your angry chirping for later, birdie... You know what we have to do, right, guys? We crush the railguns. That should let the cruisers and the supercarrier get closer and scuttle this thing with their cannons.”

Even if they were to scatter around the Noctiluca’s full three-hundred-meter length and add to the bombardment, the Juggernaut’s 88 mm cannon was like a peashooter against this massive vessel. If they were to sink this thing, they’d have to definitively destroy the control core, and the only thing that could manage that was a close-range shot from a large-caliber turret.

That said, penetrating the railguns’ armor would be difficult, too. The Juggernauts would have to fire their 88 mm turrets at close range, and to do that, they’d need to dispose of the enemies guarding it.

“So first, we’d need to get rid of those annoying rapid-fire guns...”

“Getting rid of the anti-aircraft guns comes first, Rikka,” Yuuto said composedly. **“Our units are the only ones atop the Noctiluca. We shouldn’t expect any reinforcements, and trying to destroy the rapid-fire guns with these numbers would be suicide.”**

Theo exhaled. Yuuto was right. Their springboard was gone, and besides, the only ones who could pull the stunts needed to board the ship were vanguards who were skilled with these kinds of acrobatics. Talking to Yuuto always felt like talking to a machine, but his levelheadedness was useful at times like these.

“I told the guys back at the fortress to focus fire on the anti-aircraft guns, too, but we can’t leave it to them. It’d be more efficient if we got rid of the guns.”

“I believe we can let the fleet handle the rapid-fire guns as well. But even a shot from point-blank range might not be enough to sink this ship, unless it’s aimed directly at the control core...”

The thing was three hundred meters long, after all. Even the Stella Maris and the long-distance cruisers’ 40 cm guns would only be able to punch pinholes into it. This was a battleship, and it likely had damage-control systems to match its size and status. In other words, even if the hull were to be breached, it had mechanisms in place meant to minimize the amount of water flooding in.

Based on what Ishmael told them, nuclear-power boats like the Stella Maris had their engines heavily armored. So much so that even if an airplane were to crash into it—which would carry the same amount of force as a torpedo’s direct hit—it wouldn’t damage the reactor.

Since the Noctiluca had no visible smokestacks or funnels, it likely ran on nuclear power, too. So even if they were to aim at the engine, it wouldn't do much damage. The central processor was this mechanical monstrosity's sole weakness. The only thing that could definitely silence it, though one wouldn't guess it by its exterior.

Vika connected through the Sensory Resonance. He'd likely been listening in through Lerche.

"I'll handle the investigation and analysis with regard to that. Now that the Phönix are out and about, we can infiltrate it even at a Sirin's size."

The Alkonosts' cockpit opened, and a small group of mechanical dolls in the shape of girls descended to the deck.

"I doubt there's any corridor or hatch leading to its central processor, but going inside can give us insight we won't be able to glean from the outside... This might be a Legion unit, but if the layout follows any logic, the internal facilities should be positioned roughly the same as an existing warship. If we assume this is meant to be a battleship or an amphibious assault ship, we can hazard a few guesses about the layout."

Theo didn't have the first clue what an amphibious assault ship even was.

"...I don't really get it, but if you can pull that off, we're counting on you, Prince."

"I'd imagine I'm the only one who possibly could pull it off. Milizé and her control aides have their hands full, so I'm the only one with the leisure to pull it off."

He spoke in a detached tone but then added, with a hint of annoyance:

"If Nouzen were here, we wouldn't have to go through all this trouble to find out where the control core is."

"..."

The presumptuous, offhanded jab made Theo grit his teeth. Vika had called himself a heartless Serpent of Shackles plenty of times before, and now Theo finally understood why.

"Yeah, well. He's gone now... So we have to figure this one out on our own."

He peeked out from behind the cover. Beyond the anti-aircraft and rapid-fire guns loomed the weapon that shot Undertaker down—his killer, the railgun.

And to take it down...

"First, we take care of the anti-aircraft guns."

"Right," Yuuto said. "I'd rather not get shot in the back, so let's start by getting rid of the ones on the bow side."

This fortress made of beams offered the Phönix plenty of footing to take advantage of. They jumped about in three-dimensional movement, shifting both horizontally and vertically to attack. To draw them out, some Juggernauts sprinted forward, acting as decoys. Armed with tank turrets that stressed penetrating force, the only armaments they had that could sweep across long distances were the heavy machine guns attached to their grappling arms. Those were a poor fit for fighting the Phönix, which were meant to hunt down vanguards focused on high-mobility combat.

To begin with, the Phönix trumped the Reginleif in terms of mobility. The mass-produced models were larger and looked as if their weight was greater, but their agility was the same as the original's. Their frames were better armored, and their output had apparently been augmented to match it.

And while the 88 mm turret's shells moved at high speeds, they were designed to concentrate their strength at one point at their very tip, and they couldn't hope to effectively hit it. And so...

"Raiden, go ahead!"

"Right!"

As the decoy Juggernauts passed him by, Raiden and his temporary platoon rose to their feet, firing their autocannons and dual machine guns. This temporary platoon of Juggernauts had 40 mm autocannons loaded on their gun mount arms.

A shower of steel covered the entire range they predicted the Phönix might try to flee in. Having been drawn by their prey into bombardment range, the Phönix were hit by the barrage head-on.

A tank turret was a bad fit for handling them. And since the Juggernauts were slower than the Phönix, if they were to be chased down, they wouldn't be able to shake them off. So instead, they took advantage of the pursuit—and used it to lure them into the kill zone.

This was a tactic they'd already established. Having predicted mass-produced Phönix might be included in this operation, Lena increased the number of personnel who had weapons that were better fit for handling them. In addition to the autocannons, each unit was assisted by Juggernauts with a buckshot-cannon configuration.

The area-suppression unit's multi-rocket launchers had the Phönix registered in their target tracking data. In addition, all the Juggernauts' computers were updated with the calculations for the original Phönix's speed and mobility patterns.

And so a group of Phönix ran into the line of fire, where they were torn apart by the bullets. Of course, with Shin absent, they couldn't confirm their voices had died down...meaning they looked away from their remains only after they were convinced none of the Phönix were playing dead.

—Next.

Raiden wiped the sweat from his brow and exhaled. He'd realized he was breathing quickly throughout that whole affair. They were able to put up a resistance since they'd already established countermeasures, but this wasn't an easy battle by any means.

Still, the very fact that they had some way of fighting back meant they were doing better than Theo's group, who had boarded the Noctiluca. They had to face off against that gigantic monster and its railguns.

Even still...

"Anju, Dustin, you can leave this place to us."

"What?" Anju replied, visibly confused. **"Raiden, the Phönix are still—"**

"Go down. Cover for Theo... Help him, please."

Anju swallowed her breath in shock. Realizing only now that he was absent, Snow Witch's optical sensor gazed at the Noctiluca and the white forms fighting atop it with amazement.

"...Roger that. Good lord, Theo, what are you doing...?!"

"Shuga, Emma, we'll be covering for them from here. Hurry up, though."

A few Processors who were listening in stepped forward with Snow Witch and Sagittarius and moved away. As they did, Raiden could see Shiden's Brísingamen squadron chasing the Phönix down like starved wolves, surrounding them and beating them down.



But the squadron's vice captain, Shana, wasn't among them. Her unit, Melusine, was currently at the top floor of the Spire, Carla Three. She was sniping down the antiair guns. This was originally Gunslinger's role, but she was too confused to move right now.

...He couldn't blame her. Kurena and Theo had succumbed to tunnel vision. Lena was functioning right now, but at the moment Shin fell, she was in a clear state of panic, and Raiden himself was shaken up. He could clearly tell.

After all, he couldn't hear it anymore.

After all this time, the irritating screaming of the ghosts was like constant background noise. And most prominent of all were the strange voices of the Noctiluca. For years, that red-eyed Reaper had led them...

...You stupid dumbass.

And he was that stupid dumbass's unfortunate vice captain. Raiden narrowed his reddish-black eyes. Filling the blank left in Shin's absence fell on him.

The Juggernauts repeatedly fired from the Mirage Spire in an attempt to whittle down the antiaircraft and rapid-fire guns, with some of their units going so far as to board the Noctiluca. Meanwhile, the Orphan Fleet's bombardment was gradually damaging the rapid-fire guns as well.

However, the only things capable of destroying the control core from close-range would have to be large-caliber guns. The fleet couldn't afford to let any more ships sink, so they had to keep enough distance to avoid any shells launched their way. They kept changing their course so as to avoid being aimed at while they fired.

Even still, they fired until their guns were on the verge of overheating, and they were running low on the shells they'd insisted on bringing in large numbers in anticipation of battle with the Morpho. They'd opted out of bringing torpedoes—which, ironically enough, would have been extremely effective against the Noctiluca—to add more shells, and they were still running low.

The two slower vessels and the rescue crafts finally caught up to the rest of the fleet. They'd picked up a few scant survivors from the Denebola and, through them, found out that the homeland communicated they'd be sending a reinforcement fleet.

The Noctiluca didn't get away from the battle unscathed, either. The liquid metal inside one of its 800 mm railguns' spear-like turrets—the part that formed the electromagnetic field—was being blown off

by the recoil of the bombardment.

The barrel was wearing down.

Silver slag dripped from the railgun like burning snow, sinking into the boundless expanse of the sea. And it seemed that even though the force that had boarded it was smaller than a squadron, the Noctiluca had concluded it couldn't very well let them move about freely. It had recalled several of the Phönix it had dispatched to the Mirage Spire.

As obvious a decision as it was, Theo couldn't help but click his tongue. How much longer would this thing be a thorn in their side? All the Juggernauts that boarded the Noctiluca were vanguard units equipped with 88 mm turrets. It was because they were the type of Eighty-Six who were adept at high-mobility combat that they could make that jump with such scant footing. But this also meant they were equipped with the worst possible configuration for facing the Phönix.

The artillery unit under Lena's command was offering them covering fire, and the Juggernauts firing from atop the Mirage Spire were using anti-light-armor buckshot. The help was very welcome and served to blow away the liquid armor the Phönix had, while also stalling them.

The smoke and flames of the bombardment cleared away, and another newly returned Phönix hopped to the top of the railgun's turret. Laughing Fox's optical screen switched targets as it jumped down to face this enemy.

"...!"

Theo had only just now noticed its presence. The proximity alert blared. He couldn't hear the mechanical ghost's wailing. He couldn't tell where they were hiding. Because Shin wasn't there. Until now, he could always hear where the Legion were hiding, and even if he didn't, the fact that he shared Shin's ability through the Resonance meant he could always tell how many enemies were in the vicinity.

But now Shin wasn't there. How many years had it been since Theo stood on the battlefield without him? Theo realized now, too late into the game, that he couldn't remember how he'd fought before that.

He'd been relying on him for that long.

He hopped away, straining his rig to its full capacity. As the Phönix landed with a crash, Theo aimed the heavy machine guns on Laughing Fox's grappling arms and fired at it. But exhibiting the unnatural reaction speeds unique to these murder machines, the Phönix nimbly jumped away and escaped his line of fire, landing among a group of menacing, silver shadows.

And lying at their feet was...

...a single high-frequency blade.

“Is that...?”

That’s Undertaker’s...!

When it clashed with the Phönix, he’d stabbed into it with this blade, and it likely snapped off then. In the entirety of the Strike Package, Shin was the only one to equip high-frequency blades to his grappling arms. In a battlefield where heavy machine guns and tank turrets with several kilometers in range reigned supreme, only very few chose to use melee weapons in the Eighty-Sixth Sector.

And by now their headless reaper was the only one who still did.

The Phönix stepped over the blade. With Shin and Undertaker having crashed into the ocean, this could very well have been the last remaining splinter of his unit. And those heartless murder machines were about to ruthlessly and impassively walk all over it.

At that moment, the emotion that flared up in Theo couldn’t be called anger. It was resolve and determination.

“...!”

Swiveling his 88 mm turret, he began firing rapidly. The Phönix jumped away to dodge, and he chased them away with further bombardment, reaching the spot they stood on. He was now in the middle of this pack of silver beasts.

But that was fine.

“—Fido!”

Switching his external speaker on, he shouted. The loyal Scavenger going about its work diligently at the bottom of the Spire, while still clearly worried for Shin’s fate, turned around. It immediately responded to his call, rolling over to the edge of the Spire, and Theo moved quickly, kicking the blade over to it.

His call was perhaps too vague to count as an order for a Scavenger, but Fido seemed to have understood just the same. It stood still for a second, then moved over to the blade’s estimated landing point. Earnestly keeping a track on its falling trajectory with its optical sensor, it caught it with the container on its back.

“Keep it safe! Bring it back no matter what!”

Fido’s optical sensor swerved up and down, as if nodding, just as Theo noticed a flock of enemies approaching him. He’d always relied on Shin. Always depended on him and his ability to hear the Legion’s screams and pinpoint their positions.

He who’d remembered all the comrades who died before him and promised he’d carry their memories in his heart to the final moment. Who always shouldered the role of a vanguard, who cut through enemy lines and obstructed their advance.

And most importantly, he who also ran through showers of bullets

and locked blades with the enemy in melee combat, even as he was constantly exposed to their deafening screams. All to defend his comrades.

This was the only thing Theo could do to inherit his will.

As he stood surrounded by the metal monstrosities, he saw a few of them move in to block his avenues of escape. He still made an effort to keep his voice calm.

“Laughing Fox to all units. I’ll distract the Phönix. I’ll cut into their ranks and keep them occupied. Use that chance to eliminate the target.”

I’ll cut that opportunity wide open for you. I’ll inherit that role.

Not even bothering to listen to the reactions, he thrust his control sticks forward. Paying no mind to the fact that he was surrounded, he stepped forward to face the Phönix. He’d charged into their ranks, disrupted their movements, and gathered their lines of fire on himself. By exposing himself to danger, he’d given his allies the opening they’d need.

Just like their Reaper...like Shin always did.

Firing her buckshot cannon to scare them off, Shiden raced through Level Carla as she attempted to cut off the Phönix units’ speedy escape. Lena’s dignified and somewhat ferocious voice reached her through the Resonance.

“All units, load canister shells! Fire!”

With a shower of buckshot in the final Phönix’s way, it hopped away to avoid being hit, when—

“Point E12, standby orders lifted! Fire!”

A Juggernaut that lay in wait rose from its hiding spot and unleashed machine-gun fire upon the Phönix. Hearing her commanding voice, Shiden heaved an internal sigh of relief.

You pulled yourself together, Lena.

Personally, she thought a guy like Shin wasn’t worth losing one’s composure over in the first place. It pissed her off. He had the skill worthy of his title of Reaper and willingly took it upon himself. She could respect that.

But *holy shit*, was he a rare breed of idiot.

Seriously. After all they’d been through, *that’s* how he went out?!

“If you actually died there, I’ll chase you down to hell and kill you all over again, Lady-Killer.”

With all the Phönix atop the Mirage Spire eliminated, the Juggernauts resumed their assistance in the firefight against the Noctiluca. Having

received this report, Lena took a long, sharp breath. The battle wasn't over yet. The Noctiluca was still at large.

Despite six years of experience on the battlefield, Theo wasn't familiar with engaging the Legion in melee combat. Especially not when it came to opponents like the Phönix. The stress levels were higher than in any other battle he'd been in before.

Another Phönix lunged at him. He'd lost count of how many there were. The moment they intersected, he loosed a barrage of heavy-machine-gun fire like the swinging of a blade. It wasn't enough to take it down. Laughing Fox jumped over the armored deck, dragging its feet as it sprinted away.

Theo was surrounded by enemies. The moment he stopped, they would catch up to him. And if that happened, death was guaranteed. He'd always thought he was used to mortal peril, but now he felt it more vividly than ever. Fighting in such close quarters, it breathed down his neck, coiling around him and refusing to let go.

His survival instinct, that most primal of impulses, was screaming at him. *I don't want to die.* His every sense, every bit of his consciousness was strained, forming a tightly knit, sharp strand of focus and concentration.

Yes, he did not want to die. His mind rejected death with all its might. He couldn't afford to fall here. Because dying here wouldn't match Shin's death. It wasn't a death he could call just or satisfying. Shin would have perished for naught.

There was no one there to redeem the captain. The way Theo was now, he hadn't done anything to repay his sacrifice.

...That's not good enough. I can't accept that.

Enemy fire was upon him. Paying no heed to their overheating barrels, the anti-aircraft guns began shooting at Laughing Fox. But in the next moment, missiles launched by a Juggernaut burst above the guns, unleashing a spray of armor-piercing buckshot.

This world might be rife with malice, but admitting that was just how things were was nothing more than submitting and resigning himself to that ill will. It would be admitting he was nothing more than someone who deserved to be stolen from. Someone who could gain nothing, whose role in life was to be walked on.

It would be admitting that he, and his comrades, and the Open Sea clans, and Shin, and the captain all deserved to die—to be robbed of their pride. And he didn't want that. He wouldn't admit it. Never.

With the Noctiluca's bow secured by the other Juggernauts, wire anchors shot forth from the cover of the Spire's scaffolding. Two anchors latched on to the deck, and new Juggernauts boarded the

ship, kicking against the ground as they landed.

Raiden's Wehrwolf, Anju's Snow Witch, and Dustin's Sagittarius. Apparently, a few of the rescue ships towed some of the beams that had fallen from the Noctiluca's missed shot, holding them up along the wall. A handful of the panels happened to not fall, allowing for the beams to form a foothold for the other units to board the ship.

The footing fell down into the water after it repeatedly had to support a weight of over ten tonnes. The rescue boats hurriedly let go of the beams and moved away, so as to not be dragged down with them.

The moment it landed, Snow Witch unleashed a barrage of rockets from its launcher. Wehrwolf fired as well. The unleashed armor-piercing buckshot and autocannon fire mowed through the air, forcing the units closing in on Laughing Fox to scatter.

"I'm sorry we took so long, Theo," Anju called out.

"Leave the rest of the Phönix to us... And don't pull any more crazy stunts. You don't have to imitate that part of him, too."

"...Right."

His breathing was still ragged. Theo inhaled heavily. As the rain of steel flew through the air, he looked up at the two railguns.

He was reminded of the words he heard before the battle started.

So long as you live, you can find it.

That had to have been a lie. Ishmael might not have meant to lie when he said it, but it was a lie all the same. And even if it wasn't, it definitely wasn't the truth.

To live on, one had to find something to give them purpose. Even if they'd lost it, they had to find the one thing to give them shape. Even after it was taken from them, they had to push forward if they intended to survive. Otherwise, they would be defeated. They'd die and have it taken from them.

One had to find it. No matter what was taken from them or how many times they had been deprived. They had to keep their head up, even if that meant lying to themselves.

I don't want to live life ashamed of who I am.

Isn't that right, Shin? I don't want to be ashamed, either. Not of myself, nor of you or the captain. I'll avenge you two, so I don't have to live in shame...

A maintenance machine discovered and disposed of the last Sirin that remained of the force that'd infiltrated the Noctiluca's interior.

"Tch..." Vika couldn't help but click his teeth in annoyance.

He'd been able to narrow down the control core's position, but it still wasn't clear. It felt like he was so close to pulling it off, but now

that he didn't have any means of gathering intel, he couldn't hope to produce a perfect result.

To begin with, the Stella Maris was running short on shells. He connected to the integrated bridge through the Para-RAID and parted his lips to speak.

"Milizé, Captain, I'll send you my current estimate of the control core's position. I narrowed it down to three possible spots, but I can't investigate any more than that. I'm sorry that all I can send are incomplete results, but..."

Large-caliber cannons meant for naval battles had a longer range than a tank turret. Gadyuka's 120 mm cannon wasn't quite good enough for the task, either. But based on how close it was to the target, it might prove useful.

Vika spoke, sending the data with one hand and punching in commands for combat maneuvers with the other...

...but his hand stopped as, out of the corner of his eye, he saw a flash of steel-blue at the end of the hangar.

The bombardment from the Mirage Spire blew away the final anti-aircraft gun. The last remaining Phönix on the Noctiluca was pushed off the deck, as if in an act of vengeance for what it did to Shin. As those reports were shouted through the radio, the Benetnasch's final shot intersected with the 800 mm cannon's trajectory.

A 40 cm shell shed its outer layer above the Noctiluca, scattering bombs that fell over the last remaining couple of 155 mm rapid-fire guns on the portside and exploded. As it happened, the 800 mm shell gouged into the Benetnasch's hull. Its stern was torn off with almost comical ease. The propellers were damaged as well, making it rapidly lose speed and stop in place.

The Benetnasch was stranded in place.

As he watched it happen over the screen, Ishmael parted his lips. With this, the Noctiluca's armaments were reduced to five rapid-fire guns, which were fixed on the starboard—the opposite direction of them. And of course, there were the most menacing weapons of all, the two main turrets.

But despite that, the Benetnasch was rendered immobile, and both of the Basilicus's main guns were damaged. The Stella Maris was running out of shells as well, with only its spare ammo depot remaining in its arsenal. Should they deplete that, Ishmael was willing to sink the enemy by ramming them if need be. But before it came to that...

"We're preparing to fire the anti-leviathan gun. Captain Milizé."

The girl focused on commanding the Juggernauts turned to face him.

“Take your troops and prepare to evacuate the ship. The rescue boats will collect you, so use them to go back. That applies to the Eighty-Six inside the Spire, too. The rescue boats should sidle up to the bottom of the base. You’ll have to abandon the Reginleifs, but they have room for the kids.”

The generals who planned this operation insisted on attaching two more rescue boats for that explicit purpose. So that in the worst-case scenario, where the Stella Maris was rendered immobile, the child soldiers would still be returned home.

“The Strike Package has completed its objectives. You took control of the enemy base and eliminated the Morpho. So you’ve done enough. You don’t have to take part in the Fleet Countries’ and the Orphan Fleet’s war any longer.”

But Lena shook her head firmly.

“No.”

This was Ishmael’s responsibility, resolve, and sense of pride. But the Eighty-Six had their own pride to adhere to in this situation, and as their queen, she had a responsibility to see it through.

“Leaving you behind and running away would leave a bad taste in their mouths. And it would wound my pride, too. So long as they continue to fight, I have to stay on the same battlefield as them. I won’t make preparations to flee.”

An elevator ferried a patrol helicopter on the Benetnasch’s tilted top deck. They revved up the helicopter’s engine until they achieved liftoff, though their ascent was a wobbly one. That was because they’d attached cannon shells to parts without pylons, making the helicopter exceed its normal weight capacity. It was clear with a glance that it was armed to self-destruct, effectively made into a missile that would plummet toward the Noctiluca.

With that sight as their backdrop, the two sovereigns glared at each other. The final leader of the clans that fought monsters across the merciless seas, and the queen leading the Eighty-Six who survived the horrors of the Eighty-Sixth Sector.

“...If things get too dicey, I’ll exert my captain’s authority to have you evacuate. All right?”

The helicopter’s suicidal charge was right in front of the Noctiluca. They could see the starboard’s rapid-fire guns revolving to shoot it and how it was gunned down before it could achieve its task.

The helicopter crashed down, reduced to a lump of metal that didn’t even resemble its original shape. The shells it carried caught fire and

exploded. In the blink of an eye, the ocean was lit ablaze.

The long-distance cruiser ran on nuclear power, but the patrol helicopters it carried ran on gas turbine engines. The ships had jet fuel for refueling purposes, which leaked from the Benetnasch and the Denebola, spreading over the water's surface. Vaporized fuel caught fire. Red flames slithered across the sea's surface.

The blue battlefield of the open sea was dyed red.

Lit up by those flames, the Noctiluca continued firing at the Denebola, which kept it fixed in place. Its shelling finally hit the ship's engine room. The 155 mm rapid-fire guns' insistent shelling tore through much of the hull, exposing its interiors and stabbing into the inner mechanisms of the ship.

None of the ship's operators survived. The Denebola was effectively a dead, ravaged shell, only just barely moved by its engine. Finally, its propellers ground to a halt. Still, the anchoring ropes insistently clung to the Noctiluca. It was as if the hands of the sunken crew's ghosts persisted on keeping it fixed in place.

The Noctiluca pushed forward as if trying to shake it off, turning around as it moved. Most of the anchoring ropes were torn away, but some of them remained intact, resulting in the Noctiluca towing the ship's wreckage as it moved.

The Noctiluca's engines roared like cannons as its optical sensors turned to the enemy flagship—the Stella Maris.

The massive ship moved. It changed direction so suddenly that the hull tilted almost to the point of capsizing. As the deck pitched forward so hard that one could clearly see the water below them, Juggernauts and Phönix slipped off the deck and into the water.

“Shit...!”

Raiden reflexively fired an anchor, stopping Wehrwolf in place.

Dammit. It's on the move. We've only taken care of the anti-aircraft guns and the Phönix, but there are still a few rapid-fire guns.

The ship's bow ran parallel to the Stella Maris, and as it passed it by, it turned its starboard side toward it. Its unharmed main turrets and five remaining guns swerved to aim at the supercarrier. It was the perfect position to unleash its full firepower upon the enemy craft.

Raiden could see the Stella Maris hurriedly turning away in the distance. The two 800 mm turrets swerved to follow it, as if mocking its attempt at an escape.

I ain't letting you do that.

Shin had shot down his brother, and with that as the only wish he

had granted, he was meant to die without gaining anything else. And yet he lived on, showing them the way by choosing to live alongside another.

While most of the Republic's citizens perished in the large-scale offensive, the old woman who sheltered him and the priest who took care of Shin survived and were reunited with him.

Salvation and restitution did exist in this world.

It always felt as if they'd been presented with that sliver of hope. But this world proved it could be vicious enough to take it all away after making them foster that expectation. And if that was the case, the last thing Raiden was going to do was freeze up in the face of this calculated, intentional despair.

The ship was so inclined, it was impossible to even have his Juggernaut stand upright. If he did try shooting when he was dangling off the wire anchor, he couldn't expect his shots to be at all accurate.

"Guess I gotta shake it up, then... All I have to do is stabilize this thing."

Armament selection, change.

The sea burned, and as the flaming waves cut into its bow, the Noctiluca turned head. Snow Witch dumped its now-empty missile pad, instead firing its heavy machine guns in rapid barrages. The other Juggernauts on the deck stabilized themselves with wire anchors as well. The deck's incline had become so steep, Snow Witch's legs were dangling against the air as Anju stabilized her unit.

She could see one of the Noctiluca's 800 mm turrets turn, but she didn't have any armaments capable of attacking it. Heavy machine guns, as devastating a weapon as they were, couldn't hope to deal any significant damage to such a massive turret.

...Lena's on that ship. And Frederica, too. What do we do...?

Anju gritted her teeth. It was then that she saw something ahead of her. A piece of metal scaffolding had slipped down the inclined deck and stuck into place, and tangled with it was an Alkonost, now devoid of its Sirin. Alkonosts were equipped with high explosives for self-destruction purposes, so as to prevent the Legion from accessing any classified information within them.

Hanging near her was Sagittarius. They'd formed an impromptu team of two, covering for each other as they swept up the Phönix... and they both ran out of ammunition at the same time.

Snow Witch wasn't quite close enough to the Alkonost. Sagittarius was closer, but since Dustin had significantly less experience piloting a Reginleif, it wasn't likely that he'd be able to pull this kind of stunt.

"...Anju."

“I know.”

But they had no other choice.

“But...you’d better not forget.”

He was their vanguard. He always cut ahead, fighting through everything in their way, even showing them his way of life and giving them hope. He’d shown the happiness that lay in looking toward the future and wishing for more. Both to her, and to Dustin.

Even if he’d been lost to this battle.

“Of course not. How could I ever?”

She could feel Dustin smile through the Resonance.

“I won’t die and leave you behind.”

Armament selection, change. Leg-mounted armor-piercing pile drivers. All four, simultaneous triggering.

Fire.

Wehrwolf’s four 57 mm electromagnetic pile drivers thrust into the armored deck, fixing the Reginleif in place. The recoil dislodged the anchors as the wires drew an arc through the air. Raiden then hurriedly returned his armament selection to his main turret. The Reginleif’s 40 mm autocannon was set on its rear gun mount arm, which was capable of rotating, albeit to a limited extent.

He once again squeezed the trigger.

“How do you like...this?!”

Tracing his field of vision, the wavering sights adjusted as the autocannon roared like an animal, unleashing a barrage of shells into the air.

Sagittarius’s leg-mounted pile drivers all fired, fixing his unit in place.

“Now, Anju! Go!”

As he did, Snow Witch kicked hard against the inclined deck, launching herself into a jump. Using Sagittarius as a second footing, she jumped farther away, landing on the scaffolding. Sooner than it could bend under Snow Witch’s weight, Anju kicked away the Alkonost with all the force her unit could muster.

“Please! Get there!”

Looking up as in prayer, she fired her dual heavy machine guns.

Wehrwolf’s autocannon fire reached near the 800 mm cannon at the ship’s stern, penetrating the liquid metal in charge of forming the electromagnetic field within it. His autocannon might not have been able to destroy the turret itself, but the massive impact of his shots

had more than enough power to shatter the liquid metal like a pane of glass.

Meanwhile, on the bow side of the ship, the Alkonost plummeted into the muzzle of the 800 mm cannon. Snow Witch's machine-gun fire tore through the Alkonost, igniting and triggering the high explosives within it. The explosion it caused traveled at eight thousand meters per second, scattering the liquid metal away.

The next moment, the turret fired an 800 mm shell, its trajectory slightly disturbed by the disrupted electromagnetic field. While the two ships were locked in naval combat at what was effectively point-blank range, the trajectory was diverted by some ten kilometers, resulting in a missed shot.

Both of the railguns' powerful shots missed the Stella Maris by a wide margin, plummeting into the sea beside them. A massive, almost sweeping tidal wave washed over the Stella Maris's flight deck. But humankind's largest battleship, with a displacement of ten thousand tonnes, would not be overturned so easily.

The Juggernauts onboard the flight deck also managed to avoid being swept away by the waves. However, in exchange for their mother ship's safety...

The recoil of the firing resulted in a heavier strain than the piles could handle, making them come off. The scaffolding creaked under the weight of a ten-tonne Reginleif, rolling away noisily.

Wehrwolf, Snow Witch, and Sagittarius all slipped away from the inclined deck. They all tried firing wire anchors, but none of them made it in time.

Three pillars of water splashed against the Noctiluca's flank.

They were only able to disrupt two destructive shots from the 800 mm cannons. The five autocannons' fire freely flew toward the Stella Maris. The barrage traveled in a vicious fan formation, ensuring that no matter if the ship moved left or right, it would get hit.

The Stella Maris chose neither. It took a gentle turn, confronting the Noctiluca directly, and in the few seconds before impact, it assumed the position where the least surface area would be hit. The storm may have passed, but the winds were still quite intense, and in an ironic twist, the tidal waves that resulted from the 800 mm shells hit the Stella Maris a second before the 155 mm shells could, further pushing the supercarrier off their trajectory.

Impeded by the intense winds and knocked out of their aim by the waves, the rapid-fire shells that should have hit the Stella Maris's bow

only ended in a point-blank miss, skimming the ship's broadside and landing in the ocean.

That was where their good luck ran out, though.

"An impact on propellor number two?! It looks to be out of commission!"

As that report reached his ears, Ishmael clicked his tongue.

"The shells hit us underwater. Talk about rotten luck at the very end..."

When a shell entered the water at a certain angle, water resistance could cause it to move in a straight trajectory. One of the shots that skimmed the Stella Maris accidentally kept going in a direct trajectory, hitting the propeller.

Four propellers drove the gigantic vessel forward. The Stella Maris was already slower than the Noctiluca, and with one of them gone, it had suffered a fatal decrease in speed and mobility.

"Raiden?! Anju!"

Feeling Raiden, Anju, and Dustin get disconnected from the Resonance, Theo raised his voice in panic. Paying no heed to the Juggernauts that had fallen off its deck, the Noctiluca composedly finished turning its rudder. The vessel gradually returned from its slanted position to a horizontal bearing.

"...!"

This was his chance to attack. After all, the railguns barely had any defenses left. The Stella Maris was stuck; perhaps it had failed to evade the rapid-fire shells. And right in front of the Noctiluca, of all places!

As if spurred forward by the sight of his comrades' sacrifices, Theo lunged Laughing Fox forward. But seeing through him, two Feldreß stood in its way. One was a Alkonost that looked like a sculpture chiseled out of ice, and the other was an ivory Reginleif, just like his. Lerche's Chaika and Yuuto's Verethragna.

The only two that remained of the units that boarded the Noctiluca with him.

"There are two enemy cannons, Sir Fox. You cannot defeat them alone."

"The enemy's smart... They still have something up their sleeve."

The inhuman girl's coldness and the emotionless tone of his comrade were like splashes of cold water over his heated nerves. Realizing he was once again settling into tunnel vision, he took a long breath.

"Sorry... Thanks."

Verethragna regarded him with a glance.

“You handle the main guns, Rikka... You get the finishing blow.”

The Noctiluca finished turning, reverting to its original state. The deck once again shifted horizontally and then began tilting in the opposite direction. It had turned its rudder the other way, swiveling its bow in the direction of the Stella Maris, which had lost speed all of a sudden. It was approaching the enemy ship, exhibiting full intent to kill.

Even a Reginleif couldn't move when the deck was completely inclined. This was the only time they could approach the railguns, and Yuuto had no intention of letting that chance pass him by. His eyes, as cold and emotionless as Verethragna's optical sensor, were fixed on the railguns as he spoke.

“Verethragna to all units within the fortress. I'm attempting to destroy the enemy's main guns. I'll designate the bow-side gun Frieda and the stern-side gun Gisela. I'll begin with Frieda... I'm counting on you to eliminate the starboard rapid-fire guns.”

He didn't have the time to prioritize removing the rapid-fire guns, and he didn't have the leisure to wait for reinforcements.

The deck tilted, quickly approaching the point where running across it would become impossible.

“...Lerche.”

“Always ready,” she replied with a nod, her voice like the chirping of a bird.

“—Let's go.”

They charged forward. Chaika had a slight lead on him. The Noctiluca's deck drew a steep incline toward the center, and from their position on the bow, it almost looked like the deck was pitching above them. They sped across the burned surface, hurrying over to the bow-side turret lording over them.

They hectically jumped left and right, evading the enemy guns' sights with animalistic sprinting, pulling sharp turns a human would never be able to pull off.

There were still a few active rapid-fire guns. Some of them were revolving at close range, turning to target Chaika. But the moment they were about to shoot, their consorts in the Mirage Spire fired at the guns.

A concentrated barrage of 88 mm APFSDS shells hit the unarmored head of the guns, penetrating and bursting over them. As the point-blank explosion blew the turrets to smithereens, Chaika fearlessly sprinted through the debris.

The 800 mm turrets were the Noctiluca's main armaments. It

wouldn't let a few measly Feldreß destroy them. With a heavy, ominous whistling of the wind, the bow side's Frieda and the stern side's Gisela revolved at the same time. The thirty-meter-long, 800 mm caliber turrets turned to face two Feldreß that were far too small by comparison.

They aimed at them, and then...

“—Yuuto! Leave Gisela to us!”

The next moment, as both railguns—even the stern side's Gisela—turned to the ship's bow to aim at Chaika, a new squadron leaped onto the ship's stern. The distance between the Mirage Spire and the Noctiluca was by now too far for the Reginleifs to jump across by any means. But they got there through the wreckage of the Denebola—the ship that had sacrificed itself to stall the Noctiluca's progress.

The Noctiluca dragged its lifeless steel carcass after it as it moved, and it had served as a stepping stone between the Mirage Spire and the massive craft. When they couldn't jump far enough, they used wire anchors to close the distance and reach the deck.

Shiden's Cyclops led the charge, followed by the entirety of the Brisingamen squadron, with the exception of five of their units that had been damaged in the battle, and Melusine, which stayed behind at the top of the fortress.

Like pirates boarding an enemy ship, the girls landed on the deck and immediately clung to the turret in front of them. All fifty antiaircraft guns and twenty-two rapid-fire guns were ruined. The other turrets formed a staircase-like superstructure leading up to the main turrets.

Firing their anchors again for support, the Reginleifs used the tips of their legs to climb up what little footing they had. With the girls flocking it beyond its barrel's thirty-meter length, Gisela was unable to shoot. And with Gisela in its way, Frieda couldn't aim, either.

Left with no other choice, Gisela swung its long barrel, the wind whistling as it moved. The barrel itself was a giant mass weighing in at several hundreds of tonnes, ramming into one unfortunate, careless unit. The Reginleif bent out of shape and rolled down to the sea. But the Juggernauts, not even having the time to call out their comrade's name, continued climbing up.

Gisela's turret swerved to and fro like a bucking horse, knocking out a few other units as if swatting flies. But eventually...

Chaika had reached right in front of the bow side's railgun, Frieda.

Cyclops climbed up to the stern side's railgun, Gisela.

Above each of the turrets, the silver wings meant for relieving heat had unfurled, hanging over them like the blades of a guillotine. They fell apart like snow, becoming conductive wires for melee combat. This was the last self-defense weapon the Morpho had when it faced Shin at the Spire's top floor. It still had that final card up its sleeve in case the enemy did manage to close in on it.

Chaika and Cyclops were too close to the conductive wires, meaning that Lena's tactic of disabling the wires with incendiary bombs wasn't viable like it was against the Morpho. However...

“—You think you can pull the rug out from under us with that overdone tactic, you metal monstrosity?”

Chaika stopped in place and fired. Her legs screeched against the chaffed deck as she hit a sudden brake, aiming at the conductive wires swinging down at her. The timed fuse was set to trigger at minimal time lag, in midair. Depleting all its ammo, the blast shielded Chaika from the wires, tearing them apart in the process.

Chaika was also caught up in its own blast, however, and crumpled to the ground. The shells had a minimal triggering distance, so as to ensure that the unit that fired them wouldn't be caught in the blast radius. Lerche had disabled that setting, however. With the explosion taking place almost directly in front of her, there was no guarantee she would walk away from it unscathed.

Pelted with the fragments of its own point-blank shot, Chaika had been torn into like a rag doll and collapsed powerlessly. But as if rising from its shadow, Yuuto's Verethragna slipped through the storm of conductive wires and shell fragments.

There were only twenty more meters to the turret. He was close enough to the thirty-meter-long barrel to be in its blind spot. However...

I knew it. One step too short...

...Yuuto could see the turret swing toward him from the corner of his eye. It had begun turning to swat Chaika away and was now about to hit him. He was just shy of reaching the back of the turret, where the control core likely was. The spear-like prongs of the barrel were approaching him in a sideways sweep.

With his concentration strained, time seemed to slow to a crawl. Once it hit him, though, his Juggernaut wouldn't be able to withstand a blow from such a massive, heavy weapon.

But he'd shed away any such sense of fear or dread years ago. His comrades dying felt like a forgone conclusion. Up until he joined the Strike Package, the fact that none of them might survive felt painfully obvious.

The barrel approached, mere moments away from bashing him. But for some reason, Yuuto was reminded of his exchange with Theo

in the Spire. A tower where the higher you climbed, the more you shed away your emotions, desires, and suffering. A place of cleansing, where one ascended toward death.

Being in the Eighty-Sixth Sector felt like a constant climb up that tower. But he was no longer climbing. They weren't within the Eighty-Sixth Sector's lethal bounds anymore, so they didn't have to live as if rushing to their deaths.

In which case, perhaps they didn't have to discard their emotions and desires—essentially, everything but their pride—either.

Frieda's turret swept in to bash him like a blunt weapon. But he didn't have the means to destroy it nor defend himself from it. So he ignored it, fixing his eyes on a different target. The conductive wires that had to be silenced if they were to destroy Frieda. He fired his 88 mm tank turret at the base of the butterfly wings, from which they extended.

“—Shiden, I'll handle the wires.”

As the rest of her consorts evacuated to the lower levels, she stayed behind on the Mirage Spire's top floor, Carla Three. One sector of the floor had its scaffolding slanted outward, like a broken flower petal. Melusine had sneaked to the tip of that spot, trying to close its distance with the Noctiluca.

Despite it not being her forte, Shana carefully aimed as she prepared to snipe it from a distance. She had climbed too high to jump and board the enemy, and to make matters worse, not only was the wind too intense to accurately shoot, but her footing was terribly unstable. Since she wasn't used to this kind of sniping, one wrong step could result in the footing snapping under her, or her slipping off and tumbling down.

But she had to brave this danger and get closer. As risky as it was, if she didn't, they'd lose and die.

This world didn't need humanity. This world and its people were full of malice and cruelty. Kurena had seen it for herself just now, but Shana didn't need to lose someone dear to her before her eyes to know this.

The world was cruel. It drove a knife into one's heart with a sinister grin, as if to say that one would be better off dead. And that was exactly why she refused to die. She could never bring herself to love this world, and so she would never obey its words, either.

She was trying to shoot Gisela's rear diagonally from above. She was aiming at the turret's base, at a gap in its armor from which the wires extended. She was going to snipe from her position on the Mirage Spire, which was already almost out of sight for the Noctiluca,

accurately striking a APFSDS shell right into it.

The wires spilled out, writhing like the entrails of a dying snake. Cyclops sprinted across it, slipping to the back of the turret and unleashing a buckshot at the railgun's control core.

"Drop dead, you big motherfucker."

Click.

The 88 mm flew through the air, piercing and penetrating the back of Gisela's turret. In place of a scream, liquid gushed out. While fixed in place, the stern-side 800 mm railgun seemed to bend backward as fire billowed from it, and at long last, it crumbled in place.

Meanwhile, on the bow side, Frieda's conductive wires were severed from their core. The HEAT shell that hit it ignited the conductive wires, causing them to lose control and flop powerlessly to the ground.

But even with its wires removed, Frieda itself was still very much alive. In order to remove the enemy units that had approached it, it swung its gigantic turret in quick sweeps.

"I got rid of its self-defense weapon... You handle the rest," Yuuto said as Verethragna hopped away to the side.

Its attempt to dodge was futile, however, and Frieda's barrel caught up with it in no time, knocking the ten-tonne Juggernaut away like a pebble.

Yuuto's Para-RAID shut off.

Without raising his voice in a scream, Yuuto and Verethragna plummeted down to the sea beneath them. And in exchange for that fierce conclusion...

"—Yeah. Leave it to me, Yuuto. You too, Lerche."

Cutting through the flames still hanging over the air, Laughing Fox appeared over Frieda. While Chaika crept along the surface and Verethragna acted as bait, Laughing Fox had used the flames as cover to ascend above Frieda using its wire anchor.

With both its turret and optical sensors focused downward at the deck, this act of three-dimensional coordination took Frieda by surprise. And now its self-defense armament was eliminated.

However, Frieda itself—the railgun—hadn't fired yet. It swiveled its spear-like turret, locking onto Laughing Fox. Tendrils of electricity ran through the barrel with a buzz, and in the next moment, a thundering explosion shook the air.

Laughing Fox's optical sensor looked down on it from above, reflecting the 800 mm caliber muzzle glaring at it. Even if it was a giant cannon, it was still a Legion. Its reaction speed was devilishly

quick. And in order to destroy the cannon's control core, he'd have to get to the back of the turret.

I've got no choice.

A gigantic aperture, large enough for a person to slip inside. Loaded within it was an 800 mm shell primed for firing. Theo locked onto it.

Click.

The Reginleif's smoothbore gun fired, ringing out like it had just hit a metal plate. It may have been a gun turret, but the hole was still 800 mm wide. The pronged spear-like barrel's gap was just large enough to fit a medium-size shell.

But right before firing, he'd slightly adjusted his sights. The angle was just a little off. The 88 mm shell traveled halfway through the reverse trajectory the 800 mm shell would. But just as it passed halfway through the barrel, it made contact with the liquid forming the electromagnetic field, tearing through the shell as it pierced into it.

The fuse triggered and then burst.

Part of the liquid that formed the electromagnetic field splattered. This was a several-hundred-tonne turret, and even if an 88 mm shell were to blow up inside it, it wouldn't be destroyed. But if the fluid inside it were to be blown away, it would short the circuits and make the electric current go berserk. And unfortunately for Frieda, the 800 mm shell it had loaded to blow away the insect skittering in front of it had its outer shell's fuse malfunction and trigger between the rails.

This served to only intensify the explosion, producing a deafening blast. The shell burst before it could be charged and accelerated with kinetic energy, so it lacked the full power that allowed it to blow away the fortress. But the vast energy that would have unleashed a large amount of shrapnel exploded within Frieda. As sturdy as the rails were, they couldn't withstand that shock wave.

Like a large tree split by lightning, the rails bent in opposite directions as the barrel cracked open. The rails meant to propel the railgun's shells warped into shapes that would no longer allow them to serve that role.

The railgun perished in an unseemly manner—partially as a product of coincidence. But the result was all the same.

"Frieda, eliminated."

But just as Theo began considering the remaining objectives, a shock wave shook the air.

"Theo?!"

A point-blank explosion sent Laughing Fox flying toward the

ship's bow. Seeing this, Shiden, who was sitting atop Gisela's broken turret, raised her voice in shock. After rolling over twice, Laughing Fox staggered to its feet. Speaking through the Resonance, Theo groaned dizzily.

"U-ugh... Ah, I'm fine. I'm okay."

"God... You've been pulling more close calls than usual today..."

But apparently, with this, they had silenced both the 800 mm railguns. All that remained was to destroy any remaining rapid-fire guns, but as that thought crossed their mind...

...it was then that they realized that the Noctiluca was beginning to move so its left side faced the damaged Stella Maris.

The Noctiluca had closed the distance between the ships on its own, and it wouldn't take long for it to approach and shoot the supercarrier. If they were going to destroy the rapid-fire guns, they'd have to hurry.

But then Theo realized something and raised his voice tensely.

"Ah...! Shiden! Round up the Brisingamen squadron and get away from that! It's—"

He shouted a hoarse warning through the Resonance. That voice reminded Shiden of a sight she'd nearly forgotten—the visage of the battle with the railgun one year ago. Of how she overlooked the conclusion of the nightmarish battle at dawn, between the Morpho and Undertaker—though she hadn't known it was him—from atop the Gran Mur.

And how that battle ended.

In order to protect confidential information from being taken or perhaps to take down enemy units, the murder machines manifested the madness within them.

"The Morpho has a self-destruct device inside it!"

But the warning and recollection both came a moment too late. Without Shin present to confirm that the Legion were completely incapacitated, they didn't have enough time to react.

A silent flash, followed by an explosion. The shock waves and light spread out, and with them, Gisela...a thousand-tonne railgun's worth of shrapnel was sent flying in all directions.

Lena watched as Gisela self-destructed, with the Brisingamen squadron's units all above or around it getting caught up in the blast. The shrapnel dug into the Juggernauts, sending them rolling powerlessly off the Noctiluca's deck.

"...!"

She very nearly screamed but was able to stop herself.

No. Shiden had only just told her to keep it together. Losing her

composure now would be a betrayal.

She could hear Esther shout orders to dispatch rescue boats.

“Numbers five and seven, get out there. Number twelve, remain on standby after connecting them. Number fifteen, you’re on your last legs; come back for a refuel.”

The Orphan Fleet’s rescue boats moved across the burning sea nonstop, trying to save as many lives as possible. Lena hung on to the belief that one of them would pick them up.

Sea rescue was a race against time, and to improve the chances of success even a little, Frederica continually used her ability. But as she spoke between sobs, a voice called to her from the radio.

“That’s enough, missy. You can stop, really. We’ll look after their injuries. We’ve been given triage training. You don’t have to force yourself!”

But Frederica still sobbed, shaking her head in stout denial.

“No, not yet... I still have my responsibilities. There are still those who have fallen and await rescue. I shan’t stand idly by, only to live with regret. I can keep going.”

“...Yes,” Lena whispered to herself, raising her head.

We can’t afford to stop yet. The Noctiluca itself is still alive.

But then something like an alarm bell rang in her mind.

...It’s not dead?



In that case, was the railgun dead? Why did they assume that it was? How exactly did they confirm that? How could they confirm it when they had no one who could hear the moment the ghosts' incessant screams ceased...?

Something pulled her gaze up. She could see a silver form swirling above the Noctiluca. A kaleidoscope of butterflies, deflecting the light with the silent flapping of their wings. A Legion's central processor, which had taken the form of mechanical butterflies.

Liquid Micromachines.

Likely the ones in charge of Gisela's fire control. The silvery droplet that had dripped down the Mirage Spire after the Morpho's destruction...

I should have realized it back then.

Just like the Phönix before it, the Noctiluca was a commander unit that was essentially immortal. Destroying its fuselage alone wouldn't be enough to assume they'd destroyed it entirely. And it was entirely possible the same would apply to the Shepherds they'd face going forward—perhaps even the most common of Legion troops.

The butterflies fluttered down like snow. Folding their wings, they resembled ominous moonlight as they descended. They were headed for the railgun Theo destroyed. Frieda. They landed on it, coalesced, and slipped into the cracks in its armor.

The barrel had blown up from the inside, and the rails were bent and split. This railgun should not have been capable of firing. However, Lena felt a burning sense of panic overcome her.

"All Processors, evacuate Frieda's line of fire...! Theo, run!"

As she spoke, she realized it. It was no good; they wouldn't make it. The time it took her to figure it out was far too long. They should have shot down those butterflies while they were clumped together. The silver splatters the railgun would shed every time they shot it were actually Liquid Micromachines. The barrel's erosion meant the Liquid Micromachines that produced the electromagnetic field were being depleted.

Gisela was driven to total destruction, so it wasn't usable anymore. But with Frieda, the only thing they'd successfully destroyed was the barrel. They deemed the rails in charge of accelerating the shells useless and assumed they'd destroyed it.

But if all it needed to generate an electromagnetic field were Liquid Micromachines...then it could get plenty of that from its downed consort.

"It's going to shoot! The Liquid Micromachines are going to reform the barrel! They're going to repair Frieda!"

Countless particles settled over the Noctiluca's bow side, covering the bent barrel as they were absorbed into Frieda. It took them in within seconds, like dry sand sucking in water.

Its blue optical sensor lit up.

Frieda's thirty-meter barrel, which had lurched down powerlessly, once again swung through the ocean wind and rose to a horizontal position. Its bent rails were like a bull's horns, like the decoration on an Eastern-style helmet. And from within, silver light filtered out.

They were the Liquid Micromachines that formed the electromagnetic field. The space they occupied was significantly larger than the aperture originally was, but the silver liquid gushed freely, as if forming a frost crystal.

The micromachines that formed Gisela's now-ruined control system were integrated into Frieda, quite literally filling in the cracks. A thundering screech and tendrils of electricity filled the air. The electromagnetic field crackled to life. Thin streaks of electricity danced across every part of Frieda's metallic body, striking the surrounding deck and ruined cannons.

It raised its barrel horizontally, then moved its angle diagonally. Its sights were on the Mirage Spire. Specifically, the Juggernauts atop it.

The 800 mm railgun roared.

The boom of the 800 mm caused the air to quake, like thunder at close range. The destructive shock waves produced by propelling a massive shell to such high speeds shook the deck.

Laughing Fox had been knocked to the Noctiluca's bow side. Theo was able to use his wire anchor to safely land and escape the shock waves. He once again fired the wire, climbing up to the Noctiluca's deck, where he was given a view of the devastation.

"...Ah—"

A rumbling, smashing sound unlike anything he had ever heard filled his ears. The Mirage Spire base took a direct hit at close range from the 800 mm shell and was now creaking, as it was incapable of supporting its own weight.

Level Carla, in its entirety, had been hit.

The massive shell moving at high speeds carried with it intense destructive power that mercilessly smashed through the steel tower. The sturdy beams that supported the multistory building snapped and broke, and now the entire structure was letting out a metallic screech.

There should have still been people in there.

"Wh-what about Kurena? And the others?!"

His optical screen displayed fragments of ruined Juggernauts

flying through the air and some units trapped within the torn scaffolding. Thankfully, there weren't too many of them, since they'd already begun evacuating... In fact, even with that considered, very little of them had, in fact, been caught. The others must have been blown off and fell down...or, at worst, were caught directly in the line of fire and completely blown to bits.

Consort units hurried over to stranded units, tearing open the cockpits to extract their comrades from within. They dragged those who were fortunately still alive into their cockpits and hurriedly evacuated the Spire.

The Mirage Spire creaked. Unable to support its massive weight, one of the six pillars supporting it crumbled away. Each pillar on its own was the size of a building. It seemed to fall apart slowly at first, but gravity's pull made its collapse progressively faster.

As if its nerves or blood vessels were being torn off, steel beams flew out of the tower, otherwise plummeting down and becoming metallic spears. The surviving Juggernauts beneath them sped up, scrambling away to safety.

Meanwhile, splashes of Liquid Micromachines splattered out of Frieda like blood as it finished firing. Using Liquid Micromachines to fire in place of a barrel was an effort even for the Legion. Much of the liquid that formed the barrel flaked off like shards of broken crystal.

They scattered off the ship, reflecting the light and trickling into the ocean. Some of the larger bits broke off to assume butterfly form before hitting the water, riding the wind with their paper-thin wings. They then nestled back into the cracks in the barrel, which was even more bent and broken than it was before firing...

Of course, their numbers were too few to fill up the gaps again, but more Liquid Micromachines seeped out of Frieda, the silver mass coalescing like frost. Frieda was even using the micromachines that controlled it to prepare to fire again.

This was likely Frieda's—and the Noctiluca's—final shot.

And yet it seemed ready to put everything behind it...

Another thundering roar. The crackle of electricity was the horrifying proof that the cannon was ready once more. The turret revolved, screeching loudly as if something was in the way of its internal mechanisms.

"...The Stella Maris."

There were no other Juggernauts capable of moving except for his Laughing Fox. Raiden, Anju, Dustin, Yuuto, and Shiden had all fallen. The ones in the Mirage Spire, like Kurena, were trying to reach safety in the base of the tower before the entire structure collapsed all around them. The Stella Maris had one of its propellers damaged and had also been lured to approach the Noctiluca. It couldn't escape in

time.

And so...

His mind felt awfully calm and clear as the facts dawned on him. The world had been reduced to little more than himself and the railgun before him. No one but him could break this deadlock. He couldn't let it sink the *Stella Maris*. They couldn't lose that craft. He couldn't let Lena die. Or Frederica, Vika, Marcel, or the rest of the control crew.

Ishmael and the other members of the Open Sea clans were still at risk. Until they saw everyone safely back home, their mission was not yet complete. They branded themselves with the shame of returning while sacrificing their comrades to do it. Seeing their task through to the very end was their final fact of pride and duty.

But most importantly, the *Stella Maris* was their way back home. Everyone here had to return home.

And so did he.

"...I have to go home."

Even if he had no place he could call home, he would find it. Even if that meant making one for himself.

The crumbling tower was plummeting toward the ocean just as the *Noctiluca* brushed past it. And as it fell, the majority of its massive weight was above him and the *Noctiluca*.

Despite how heavily he'd overused them, Theo's wire anchors were made sturdily to support high-mobility combat. Laughing Fox fired its left anchor above it, coiling it around one of the *Noctiluca*'s beams. The collapsing tower was by now almost perpendicular to the sea. As it fired the anchor, Laughing Fox jumped. Reeling up his wire, Theo moved faster than his leg strength afforded him, swinging up to the railgun's top.

Yes, the world was cruel. Cruel, malicious, and absurd. People with noble reasons to live perished, and others survived, none the wiser. This was the way of the world, no matter how badly some wished it wasn't. And so those who survived had a duty to live on.

For the ones who passed away...the ones who were gone and out of reach...he would remember them.

He refused to live his life shamefully. He couldn't disgrace the memories of the dead. So he had to be happy. Even if he was all alone, even if he still dreaded thinking of the future, he had to.

Captain.

Please. Never forgive me.

He said that, not wishing to curse his own death. Even at his last moment, he cared for others. He lived nobly, to the very end.

But I still need that curse. I can't yet live without your curse to haunt me. I have to atone for your death with my way of life. You died without anyone to avenge or honor you, and I'm the only survivor who knows it.

I have to live happily. Because if I don't, you really will have died for nothing.

That's my reason.

Captain... What you did was so stupid. Ask anyone in the world, and they'll all call you an idiot. But...no matter what anyone says, you were absolutely in the right.

So I have to prove it to this world that's calling you foolish... And to do that, I have to survive. Even if I have nothing... Even if I lose it all, I...I have to find happiness. I'll inherit the curse of living a happy life...in your place.

His objective was the railgun's rear, the control core under the armor. Shiden's attack showed him the spot—one of the few weak points that could silence the railgun with a single shot. Laughing Fox soared through the air, drawing an arc as he aimed directly at that spot.

Here it is.

His target was right beneath him. Flipping his unit in midair, he aimed his turret directly down. He reflexively let out his bated breath in one short, sharp puff. Just a little longer until his sights were aligned...!

But Juggernauts couldn't fly. At most, they could move acrobatically through the air. An awfully easy trajectory to predict. From the corner of his eye, he could see the last remaining rapid-fire gun turn to aim at him. He didn't have to dodge. His sights aligned, and he began squeezing the trigger...

He didn't know the aiming procedure for a warship's gun, so he only relayed the information as he heard it.

"A hundred twenty meters from the bow, right above the waterline—"

Had he hit the ground, there was no way he would have survived. The Reginleif's high-fidelity buffering system made every attempt to protect the pilot, but his injuries were still severe enough that the military physician would strictly order him to rest and recover.

Despite this, he knew he was needed, so he interrupted the treatment and came up to the integrated bridge. He was still alive. His comrades were still out there fighting. And there were still things he could do. Knowing all that, he couldn't rest.

Vika loaned him a shoulder, muttering with a sardonic smile that he did all that analyzing for nothing. Looking around, he looked to Ishmael, who instructed the fire-control officers to adjust their sights according to his instructions.

For now, he looked away from those wide, frozen eyes gazing at him... With just that, he spoke through labored breaths, instructing them to that position.

“That’s where the control core is. That’s where *the most voices* are gathered... Aim there!”

The flight deck of the supercarrier, the *Stella Maris*. Four 40 cm guns began swiveling noisily. The deck was filled with the winds and rain of the storm, as well as the soot and marks of this battle. Even in its final voyage, the queen of warships wore her scars with pride, standing tall and proud.

With the preparations complete on the deck, the *catapult personnel* evacuated to the bridge after correcting their sights as instructed and looked up at the cannons with a flood of emotions. This was likely the last shot the *Stella Maris*’s main turret would ever fire. The fact that they needed the help of someone who wasn’t part of the Orphan Fleet, or even part of the Fleet Countries, was something that they—while thankful for—couldn’t help but resent.

“Fire!”

The guns fired, unleashing a massive explosion that released trembling shock waves. All the ship’s remaining ammunition was expelled into the air, leaving only a shroud of gun smoke...and silence. Eternal silence.

The next moment—

“You must be happy, *Stella Maris*,” one of the catapult personnel whispered. “Our final, fleeting great mother. In your last battle, you got to fire your anti-leviathan gun.”

They had received their orders to shoot from their great, pseudo-brother, Ishmael.

“Keep your sights as they are. Anti-leviathan gun, fire!”

A long steam catapult covered the runway. Raising a trail of white steam, its shuttle was awaiting the moment of its triggering, which soon came.

The intense power produced by two nuclear reactors kicked the shuttle into the air. Aircraft carriers were capable of propelling thirty-tonne fighter planes into takeoff speed. This supercarrier’s catapult drew on that history.

However, the shuttle, which would normally tow airplanes, instead dragged a long, thick chain. On its other hand was the *Stella*

Maris's bulky, fifteen-tonne anchor. The shuttle pulled it, propelling it across the flight deck's ninety-meter-long runway within less than a second.

The catapult drew its name from a siege weapon that used tension or spring screws to fire spherical masses. The catapult in use now was an auxiliary device meant to help launch planes, and it was technically closer to a ballista.

The shuttle reached the end of the runway, then stopped in place with a loud thud. The wire floated up with its full momentum, unleashing the anchor at the peak of its curve. Granted a speed of three hundred kilometers per hour, the massive, fifteen-tonne anchor was launched like a gigantic arrowhead.

The anti-leviathan gun. The supercarrier's final weapon for dispatching a Musukura, even in a case where it had completely depleted its ammunition.

The anchor soared through the air, following the 40 cm cannon shells weighing one tonne. The projectile was flung using a primitive, rough firing method, not unlike the ballista. It stood in stark contrast to the cutting-edge futuristic railgun, which no human country was able to implement in actual battle. And in the blink of an eye, their projected trajectories intersected.

He thought he heard the roar of a cannon in the distance. But that couldn't be. The shot's sound traveled slower than the shell itself. Modern warfare employed long-distance weapons that fired shells at faster than the speed of sound. A cannon's roar could never reach the human ear sooner than the shell hit its target.

But as if urged by the sound of that cannon shot, Theo pulled the trigger. The 15 mm rapid-fire gun's shot was fired at that same moment, but its blast didn't reach his ears. The 88 mm APFSDS shell dropped from directly above it pierced into Frieda's control core.

Despite knowing that it could not have been possible, Theo thought he could hear the mechanical ghost scream its last.

Bombarded from above, Frieda's barrel seemed to bend backward, as if it had been split in half along its control core. The electromagnetic force concentrated in the barrel was left without a place to go, flowing backward through its circuits. Tendrils of lightning spurted from the railgun's body like blood as it crumbled. The self-destruct system triggered the next second.

The 800 mm shell it fired was launched in a random direction, falling harmlessly into the sea. The next moment, the Stella Maris's bombardment struck the Noctiluca. And then there was another impact.

As sturdy as the Noctiluca's armor was, the Stella Maris closed the distance to it. On top of it, the Noctiluca had approached the supercarrier of its own accord earlier. It had effectively discarded the shield the distance had afforded it by curbing the shells' velocity.

A rapid barrage of 40 cm shells hit one point on the ship's broadside with lethal accuracy in quick succession. After several bursts, one of them finally penetrated the armor. The shells that followed penetrated the armor's interior, where they burst.

The explosion from within the armor module finally punched a large hole into the Noctiluca's broadside. And then a gigantic, anachronistic arrowhead flew through the hole, penetrating its heart as if to ensure the kill.

A massive spurt of Liquid Micromachines burst out like blood splatter.

A rumbling roar... Theo could hear, through the Resonance, the Noctiluca's howl. It was a wail of anger. Or perhaps hatred.

The gigantic steel vessel lurched sideways, as if losing to the projectiles' impacts. It churned the sea like a tsunami as it sank under the waves. Directing a final, spiteful glare at the supercarrier as it did.

And so the hundred-thousand-tonne massive battleship disappeared beneath the waves. All too quickly.

Still connected to the Resonance, Lena could hear that the Noctiluca's wailing hadn't died out yet. She squinted severely. It was still alive. It hadn't been sunk. It dived underwater. This whole battle began when the Noctiluca surfaced from under the sea, after all. So while it may not be capable of fighting underwater, they could probably presume it was capable of underwater navigation.

They didn't close enough distance. Most of their remaining ammunition was wasted on destroying the armor. They didn't have enough left to destroy the control core.

The Noctiluca's howl grew distant as it retreated, like a wounded fish swimming away. Hearing this, Lena turned to face Ishmael.

"Captain, we need to give chase. The Noctiluca isn't dead yet—"

But just as she said that, Lena was suddenly rendered speechless, as if her tongue had stuck to the roof of her mouth. She stood frozen in place, her thoughts grinding to a screeching halt.

The holo-screen that displayed the outside view...was completely covered by gigantic eyeballs, looking down on them. One at its center. Two more on its sides. Each eyeball was larger than a human adult. They were so large that even as predator locked eyes with prey, it didn't feel like they were indeed gazing at each other.

It was like a grim reminder of just how diminutive and brittle

humans were as a species.

Its pupils were black and surrounded by irises, and while it had no eyelids, the whites of its eyes were nearly indiscernible. Its slightly transparent pupils revealed that the structure of its eyes wasn't fundamentally different than a human's, though.

However, its pupils weren't round but had an angular diamond shape. Its irises had an almost metallic sort of rainbow gleam to them, like the feathers of a peacock. Perhaps the result of some sort of oil film reflecting the light.

An utterly alien, inhuman eye.

Several dozen kilometers away from the Mirage Spire, where the ocean had changed color, was the interstice that demarcated humankind's territory from what lay beyond. But this creature didn't stand there. No. A single leviathan had crossed that boundary and now floated right in front of the Stella Maris.

It had a long, winding neck and a sharp, elongated head. Every inch of it was covered in scales, but the texture of those scales was visibly and indescribably strange. A layer of scales with the dim glow of armor, the sharpness of a knife, and the transparency of crystal covered a layer of other scales, as soft and transparent as a jellyfish's body. Dorsal-finlike organs shaped like crystal formations extended along its back, from the top of its head to the end of its tail.

Its hard scales and the sharpness of its jaws granted it a somehow reptilian appearance, but its soft, almost squishy silhouette resembled that of a mollusk-like sea slug creature.

Its full length was an estimated three hundred thirty meters. The largest species of a leviathan, a three-hundred-meter class specimen—a Musukura—was upon them.

One of the open sea's sovereigns gazed down at the Stella Maris, serenely but arrogantly. And somehow, they could tell. It was keenly aware of the tiny, land-dwelling mammals writhing within the vessel. Its lidless eyes unblinkingly gazed at Lena and the others inside the ship.

Faced with this damaged, creaking human vessel, it regarded them with eyes utterly different from both the eyes of humans and the gaze of the man-made mechanical monsters. An almost alien sort of glare that communicated nothing.



If there was a god, it would likely look upon the world with that sort of gaze.

Before their very eyes, the Musukura suddenly opened its mouth, revealing a shining, crystal-like protrusion. Some part of Lena's paralyzed mind barely realized that this was the organ that had fired off that laser that scorched the sky earlier.

And then the Musukura howled.

!!

Its howl was a high-frequency screech that made the Stella Maris's hull shiver. It hit them at a frequency just barely audible to the human ear. It was less of a sound and more of a shock wave.

It said nothing. The leviathans weren't capable of human speech, and it was unknown if they had a form of language that they used among themselves. But even without words, the warning in its voice was clear.

Lena's body and mind were frozen with instinctual, primal terror. Humans were a race of powerless creatures that crawled along the earth. They had no business facing such a force of nature, an absolute tyrant of the natural world. Just one of them was all it took to completely break through the murder machines that human knowledge had produced.

Closing its mouth with the same suddenness with which it had opened it, the Musukura turned around. This truly gigantic creature moved with a confidence and pride that showed it feared no one and saw nothing as worthy of its unbelievable length of over three hundred meters. Its head sank beneath the waves up to its snout, but until it swam into the horizon and completely disappeared, not a single human in the area was capable of moving.

Shrinking in place and breathing as little as possible, they passed the time like small animals waiting for a storm to pass. The first to breathe out and start moving was Shin...though it wasn't a voluntary movement. He'd turned down medical treatment to come to the bridge, and it appeared that this effort had finally pushed him over the limit. He crumpled to the floor.

"Shin?!" Lena hurried over to him.

Vika, who had loaned him a shoulder, knelt down to help him but didn't approach him anymore.

"My God, man... This is why I told you not to push yourself...!"

“Your return left me without a task, so I brought you along like you asked...,” Vika said. “But it’s all right now. Go back and let the doctors take care of you. Marcel, lend us a hand.”

“Yeah, I will. Once the fighting’s over. Hang in there a little longer.”

He looked away from Lena, who seemed to be on the verge of tears. Ignoring Vika’s sigh and Marcel, who looked up at the ceiling, Shin properly fixed his RAID Device. It had been removed from him during the treatment, and he’d only crudely put it on along the way here.

Of course, the targets he was Resonating with were...

“Kurena, Theo. I’m sorry I made you worry. The rest are still being retrieved, so I haven’t checked yet, but—”

He could hear Kurena take a long, sharp breath. She then let it out in one long gasp, as if holding back tears.

“.....! Shin...!”

“Um, they picked me up, too. I’m still alive, for what it’s worth.” Raiden’s voice joined the Resonance from the operation room or a hospital room. **“Anju and Dustin got picked up together.”**

The only one who said nothing was Theo. Wiping her tears away, Lena spoke.

“Thank you, Theo. You saved us. If you hadn’t destroyed the railgun, we’d have all been done for.”

Still, no reply. But just as Shin became suspicious, finally...

“That’s...great, Lena. Shin, Raiden, you too... Thank God... Thank God you’re...safe.”

His voice was off. Like he was stifling something. Like he was enduring something...like pain.

“...Theo?”

Shin’s voice unintentionally tensed up. *He’s injured.* Shin felt the tension wring his throat. Theo’s voice just now. It was subdued, strained, and unnaturally, frighteningly calm. Something in his tone felt almost...resigned.

He wasn’t just bearing the pain of an injury.

Shin spat out the question, as if coughing it out.

“Are you hurt...? If you can’t come back on your own, we can—”

Theo cut him off. He probably didn’t have much longer to talk. The stimulus was so intense that his senses went numb, and now he couldn’t feel anything. But once his senses returned, he likely wouldn’t be able to speak.

“Yeah... Sorry.”

The 155 mm shell fired the same time he did, at the very last

moment. It was a buckshot. Maybe it didn't have time to properly set up the fuse, but it passed by Laughing Fox's flank and then self-destructed. It wasn't a direct hit. It only burst and scattered, and most of the fragments hit the cannon's rear.

Except...

Sitting on the ruins of the Denebola, the long-distance cruiser that had stalled the Noctiluca, was Laughing Fox. Sitting inside its cockpit, Theo looked at his injury. One normally wouldn't be able to see anything in the interior of the dark cockpit, but Laughing Fox was damaged, exposing its cockpit block.

The shell fragments that rushed it from behind tore cleanly through both of the unit's left legs, the armor frame, and some of the cockpit.

From within that gaping hole in the Juggernaut's frame, Theo could see the color blue. The cerulean skies. The ultramarine sea. Despite its ruined state, the long-distance cruiser's deck was still high above sea level, so he had an unimpeded view of the sea to the distance—to the open sea's blue waters, the very color that one naturally associated with the ocean.

Above the water's level was a place no one could live. No human, animal, bird, or insect could survive despite the clear air. With the storm gone, the sky was bright and free of clouds—a vast azure expanse. The horizon stood as if dividing the sky and the ocean. Below it were the waters of the open sea, and above it was the sun, its light glittering along the edges of the waves, granting the ocean a sparkling glow.

It felt like one of them was a mirror of the other. Perhaps they were both mirrors, imposed against each other. Their respective shades of blue spanned as far as the eye could see; both were alight, and they each contained in their womb a vast blackness that would remain forever impenetrable.

The blue was only the thin veneer hanging over everlasting darkness. The surface layer of a bottomless abyss.

So why, oh why, was it so painfully, breathtakingly beautiful...?

Theo never did like the battlefield. He never liked fighting. In the Eighty-Sixth Sector, he was forced to fight as a drone's component and ordered to go to his death at the very end. Theo resented it to this very moment.

He never wanted to fight; this was simply the only path that had ever been put before him. The only way to survive, to hold on to his pride.

And despite that...

Why...?

...tears spilled from his eyes.

“I can’t...fight with you anymore.”

The shell’s fragments had peppered him from behind, ripping through the sturdy cockpit with intense force. Most of the fragments and their impact hit the cannon’s rear. But the shock wave did penetrate it, shredding the interior and its parts, scattering them into the open air.

And one of them passed through his now-missing left hand...tearing it between the elbow and the wrist.



AFTERWORD

Who cares about the atmosphere in the story?!

And that, dear readers, was the sea episode. Hello, everyone, this is Asato Asato.

Honestly, I've been scared of the ocean ever since I was little, and I think that fear really manifests in this volume. The sea's really scary. Or so I say, but I actually like documentaries about the deep blue. There's a sense of dreamlike wonder to the ocean depths, you know? Like, who knows, maybe there actually is a megalodon, a kraken, or a dragon down there.

Now then. Thank you, as always! That was *86—Eighty-Six, Vol. 8: Gun Smoke on the Water*. The title is a reference to Deep Purple's "Smoke on the Water." This volume was the Fleet Countries arc. What are the Fleet Countries, you ask? Read this volume and find out!

Thank you kindly, everyone! Suzume Somemiya's *86—Operation High School* is currently being serialized, and an upcoming anime adaptation directed by Toshimasa Ishii is under production at A-1 Pictures! It's one bit of good news after the other, isn't it?! And I owe everything to the support I got from so many people. Thank you so very much! Look forward to all the new releases!

Now for some commentary, as usual.

- The supercarrier

Since its estimated opponents and budget are quite unlike a real aircraft carrier, the *86* world's aircraft carrier is armed with different weapons and used for different purposes. The fleet's composition is also different, and there are no submarines or amphibious assault ships. Incidentally, the supercarrier was originally produced in the Giadian Empire. The Fleet Countries lacked the budget or technology to make it. The Empire cared little

for open-sea voyages, but acquiring the practical data and building up their construction technology was in their interest. Add to it that on the off chance the Fleet Countries actually conquered the open seas, the Empire was interested in gaining rights over it.

- The leviathans

Originally briefly and rather nonchalantly mentioned in Volume 3, they're a part of the 86 world's marine life. Putting aside the particular breed that appears in this volume, there are six other species of leviathan. They each have their own lore to them, but they were all omitted for lack of relevance to the main story.

Oh, and for what it's worth, they won't be appearing again. I don't intend to fully reveal what they look like, either.

Lastly, some thanks.

To my editors, Kiyose and Tsuchiya. Thank you for the many points you brought up that helped improve this work's accuracy and quality.

To Shirabii. I'm writing this afterword while gazing with reverent admiration at the illustrations you drew to celebrate the anime's announcement.

To I-IV. Thank you for letting me use your ideas in yet another volume.

To Yoshihara. Thinking of how you're going to draw the true hell that is the Eighty-Sixth Sector in poignant detail makes me so excited!

To Somemiya. Both sailor-suit Lena with her dazzling smile and school-jacket Shin with that little rebellious expression were absolutely adorable. I can't describe how much I'm looking forward to seeing them and their friends experiencing their school life!

To Director Ishii and the production staff. Every time we meet, I can sense your overwhelming passion toward making 86 an anime, and I feel so grateful and privileged to have people like you in charge of the adaptation.

And to all the readers who picked up this book. As always, thank you so, so much. As the war's end looms just over the horizon, do watch over the Eighty-Six's choices until the very end.

In any case, I hope that even for just a moment, I was able to transport you to that vast, blue universe whose true scope lies just beyond the reach of humanity. What did you glean from our young men and women who met those brave sailors who fought on a completely foreign battlefield yet lived by the same pride?

Music playing while writing this afterword: “Smoke on the Water”
by Deep Purple

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